News from the European Alliance for Asian Studies

The articles on the “News from the EAAS” pages in this edition represent the desire to study transregional entanglements across Asia and beyond. The first contribution is on the “Shaping Asia” network, coordinated by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (Bielefeld) and Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg). The second introduces the newly funded research collaboration “Heritage as Placemaking,” headed by Sabin Ninglekhu (Kathmandu), Sasanka Perera (Delhi), Stefanie Lotter (London), and Heidelberg. The last section assembles recent research and teaching initiatives on and with Nepal at Heidelberg, including digital documentation and research-based teaching that bridges comparative work on urban transformation in Nepal, India, and Germany. The EAAS pages have been compiled by Christiane Brosius and Axel Michaels, who joined the European Alliance of Asia Scholars (EAAS) for the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS) at Heidelberg University in 2015.

Shaping Asia: Connectivities, Comparisons, Collaborations

Christiane Brosius, Claudia Dericha, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, and Ursula Rao

Fund ed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and — to a lesser extent — by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the network is comprised of scholars from 16 German universities. Currently, the main locations of activity are the Universities Bielefeld, Heidelberg, Humboldt (Berlin), and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle). Our international partners are at the National University of Singapore, the University of Tokyo, Jawaharlal Nehru University, IIT Bangalore, the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi, and Kathmandu University. We hope to further expand the network and would like to invite colleagues interested in this initiative to get in touch. We are particularly grateful to IASS and The Newsletter — an organ with a long tradition of publishing trans-regional research — to afford us this space to provide an overview of a few key ideas that ground our research collaboration. After a short theoretical introduction, we would like to highlight our work through a short description of two exemplary projects: "Knowledge production and circulation" and "Making of new infrastructures".
results from the contact. The concept of relationality increasingly impacts research in the humanities and social sciences. However, this must also include attention to disconnectivities or erasures.

The focus on interconnectiveness confronts us with important methodological challenges. Why, how, and what should we compare? The questions remain unsettled and are at the centre of methodological discussions of this network, which organizes dialogues between scholars educated and working in different countries in Europe and Asia, as well as between people trained in different disciplines and familiar with different countries. Our collaborations force us to reflect on our assumptions and on the limits of particular theoretical or empirical claims. Building comparison into our research helps establish but also critically rethink what we consider as being different and similar, and helps conceptualize and demarcate specific or unique constellations.

We are committed to fostering more and broader collaborations. For this reason, the network ‘Shaping Asia’ includes collaborations as one of its three main methodological pillars. On the one hand, we acknowledge that researchers profit greatly from sharing and collaborating, also by using forums such as the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden, the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS, Heidelberg), the European Alliance of Asia Scholars (EAAS), the Global Asia Initiative (Duke University), and the Asia Research Institute (NUS, Singapore). On the other hand, we posit that the modalities of collaboration need to be an object of academic inquiry and scrutiny as well. After all, knowledge production and circulation has been shaped and is shaped by striking power differentials, by academic extractivism, and by blatant silencing. The modalities through which knowledge is and can be co-produced require self-reflexivity and different forms of dialogue. To elaborate, we will delineate a selection of topics of inquiry that our network partners attend to.

Knowledge production and circulation

Collaboration embedded in this comprehension of knowledge production has started in a number of projects currently funded in the ‘Shaping Asia’ network initiative.

One thematic current that embraces a couple of projects is ‘knowledge production and circulation.’ In this current, scholars draw from large areas of research (e.g., postcolonial critique) while proposing novel avenues based on their strengths and addressing their shortcomings. Asia is conceived of as a region in which (post)colonial domination and the manifold ways in which it has been studied are linked to the very nature of knowledge production and circulation.

The quest for a fundamental reappraisal and reorganisation of knowledge production is a demand that the network strives to service. With a better understanding of the assumptions behind the (re-)production of knowledge about the world, and with the suggestion of alternative ways of producing and circulating it, chances to shape the world in more constructive and inclusive ways increase. Here, these alternative ways of shaping the world are taken to be relational, situated, and empowering. Collaboration evolves by way of different actors in Asia reflecting on how the views of the world are situated in the overall knowledge generation, learning, and knowledge dissemination.

The ‘knowledge’ current aims to trace scholars’ attempts to uncover, support, and develop forms of knowledge considered to be relevant. Along this vein, it is imperative not to ignore the tacit ways of knowing and knowledge transmission that are carried out in everyday human actions. The projects in said current give primacy to conscious, reflexive dealings with knowledge in the quest to uncover how Asian actors seek to actively influence their socioculture and climate. Following this principle, one of the projects addresses Muslim women in Asia who use their acquired religious knowledge in various professional activities – or for professionalization in a certain field, as it were. At the juncture of work and beliefs, businesses catering to the needs for halal products, for instance, are growing. One’s faith and religious knowledge informs one’s professional ethics. Muslim women often apply the principles of shared religious knowledge and societal norms in their practical professional life. The project aims at mapping the intersecting field of religious knowledge and Muslim women’s professionalism in Asia, providing, among other benefits, a platform to discuss how Muslim women express their connection with religion while engaging in various occupations. It maps the multiple creative fields in religious knowledge as it is the basis of Muslim women’s pathways to professional fields in the global economy, in the realm of social activism, education, welfare, and the like. It researches how faith, identity, piety, and notions of belonging are articulated by women in their professional lives.

Making of new infrastructures

Investment in new infrastructures contributes significantly to the current rapid transformation of Asia. The ‘Shaping Asia’ network also supports projects interested in the recursive processes by which new investments shape the social texture of Asian societies and vice versa. We propose comparison as an ideal tool to map contrasts and similarities across different countries and understand the role of interAsian relations. We study parallels and differences in local experiences of new technodigital solutions as they occur on the ground and the role of political culture and power dynamics for framing their implementation. The three focus areas consider (1) the way new digital infrastructures are linked to the very nature of knowledge generation, learning, and knowledge transmission that are carried out in everyday human actions. The projects in said current give primacy to conscious, reflexive dealings with knowledge in the quest to uncover how Asian actors seek to actively influence their socioculture and climate. Following this principle, one of the projects addresses Muslim women in Asia who use their acquired religious knowledge in various professional activities – or for professionalization in a certain field, as it were. At the juncture of work and beliefs, businesses catering to the needs for halal products, for instance, are growing. One’s faith and religious knowledge informs one’s professional ethics. Muslim women often apply the principles of shared religious knowledge and societal norms in their practical professional life. The project aims at mapping the intersecting field of religious knowledge and Muslim women’s professionalism in Asia, providing, among other benefits, a platform to discuss how Muslim women express their connection with religion while engaging in various occupations. It maps the multiple creative fields in religious knowledge as it is the basis of Muslim women’s pathways to professional fields in the global economy, in the realm of social activism, education, welfare, and the like. It researches how faith, identity, piety, and notions of belonging are articulated by women in their professional lives.

behaviour. Their roll-outs in different social, physical, and cultural terrains leads to many practical difficulties. These are solved through adaptations. This project studies the kind of adaptations adopted in India, Pakistan, and China that permit new technologies to become an integral part of everyday relations. The second focus area studies the variable implementation of standardised measures for coastal protection measures in South and Southeast Asia. In order to enhance climate resilience, many countries embark on international collaborations and build dams and sea walls to protect important coastal areas in order to contain mobile substances, such as water. The world will consider the orchestration achieved by deployment of indigenous solutions as well as explore limits and resistance to such homogenization. The third focus area researches the interplay of co-financing and co-innovation in (cross-border) infrastructures. Pushed predominantly by China, there are new efforts to make investments in infrastructures as a means to increase inter-Asian connectivity. Other countries, like Korea and Japan follow suit. This project investigates co- or foreign-funded infrastructure projects in the border regions between South, East, and Southeast Asia. It considers the evolving compromises and frictions that accompany investments in energy or logistic systems that affect several states. As a result, the project aims to provide a methodological framework that is vital for understanding the consequences of infrastructures, ruptures, and similarities in transregional dynamics.

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The project ‘Heritage as Placemaking’ investigates how places are made beyond their material construction through the formation of lasting bonds and shared care. We ask, what unites diverse, and at times ephemeral, communities in enabling or hindering the making of meaningful places with which future generations identify? The project focuses on large and medium-size cities as well as pilgrimage towns in North India and Nepal to capture how heritage placemaking constitutes an imagined, performative, physical, and geographical reorientation of space.

South Asia offers a politically and intellectually potent site for this study because of the ubiquitous interrelation of religious practices, socio-cultural hierarchies, ruptured notions of citizenship, and the accelerated forces of globalisation. Rather than understanding heritage-making solely as the conservative affirmation of a past status quo that preserves and restores original history, we see heritage placemaking as a constant process of formation and association that is deeply entangled in politics. The investment into collective futures is possible through forms of communing and through evoking the commons to claim and manage shared space. By studying the engagement of pilgrims who transit in groups through Nepal and India to explore their religious interpretations of the sacred landscape and their interaction with pilgrimage sites, local communities, and the nation-state, Jayatilake will contribute to this discourse the dimension of virtual placemaking, exploring the material and discursive creation of pilgrimage circuits and digital spaces beyond the state’s tourism efforts and local realties.

Heritage-making’s bureaucracy, lived gendered experience, activist formations, and selective historicity are investigated at the Social Science Baha in Kathmandu by Sabin Ninglekhu, Manalis Maharjan, and Binita Magaluy. Ninglekhu will study heritage bureaucracies at work at the pilgrimage sites, countering Jayatilake’s work while also contributing insights into the bureaucracy at the project’s sites in the Kathmandu valley, highlighting heritage governance and governmentality. Complementing Brosius’ work on the public life and erosion of arced platforms, Maharjan studies communal water spouts (dhunga dhara/hiti) as sites of heritage activism as well as of gendered spatialisation. Erasure and loss of heritage are at the heart of Magaluy’s study of rules and their communal interpretation.

Finally, at SOAS, University of London, Stefanie Lotter and Emiline Smith will engage with the discourses of both development and repatriation, which reposition heritage in the contemporary decolonisation discourse. Lotter will work in collaboration with Magaluy on the conscious erasure of heritage through local and national agents. She will also work on the history of 50 years of international development collaboration in Bhaktapur, where heritage protection, destruction, reconstruction, and ownership have become increasingly contested. Emiline Smith will lead on questions of ownership of heritage by contributing a criminological perspective on heritage theft. With a collaborative study on movable objects and the repatriation discourse of stolen, lost, and rediscovered artefacts, her study adds insights into the entangled nature of placemaking.

Through the project ‘Heritage as Placemaking,’ we open the field of heritage studies in South Asia to enquiries that evolve around questions of ‘whose heritage’ and ‘whose rights.’ Together, the project team aims to create a better understanding of dynamic solidarities amongst different communities invested in making the, the upkeep, and the erasure of living and lived heritage. To this end, the project explores communal resourcefulness, political will, and bureaucratic attention critical to forming solidarities and making place for the future.

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everal initiatives at the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS) – based at Heidelberg University and with the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences – bring together a particular research focus and expertise on Nepal from a transcultural, interdisciplinary, and internationally networked perspective. The projects mirror the broad and get carefully entangled focus on digital humanities, on heritage documentation and critical heritage studies, as well as on the exploration of urbanization in larger fields of current research – ranging from the medieval period onwards and continuing into the present.

Due to having remained largely untouched by both Muslim conquest and British colonial rule, in Nepal Hindu kingship and its related forms of rule and social organization continued thriving long after they ceased elsewhere on the South Asian subcontinent. Its geopolitical location as a high-altitude and landlocked to access country between the Indian and Tibetan/ Chinese cultural spheres favored Nepal as a repository and archive on the one hand, but also as a contact zone where external influences and local developments were negotiated in unique ways. Here, we present glimpses on four interdisciplinary initiatives that engage Nepal in larger fields of current research – ranging from the digital documentation of built and performed cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley to the exploration of urbanization in South Asia: (1) the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project (NHDP); (2) the Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Pre-modern Nepal (Documenta Nepalica) project; (3) the Anthropology of Inscriptions project; and (4) a multilateral partnership that combines research and teaching about urban transformation in Kathmandu, Delhi, and Heidelberg.

NHDP, substantially supported by the Arcadia Fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, was started in 2018. It provides an open access approach to extensive heritage documentation in Nepal, with a particular focus on the Kathmandu Valley and West Nepal. In Germany, the NHDP is run collaboratively by the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies (HTCS) and the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (HAdW). Key partners and representatives in Nepal include the Saraf Foundation of Himalayan Traditions and Culture and the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Nepal. NHDP’s first commitment is to historical monuments that are spread across the Kathmandu Valley. These monuments still play important roles in active social and religious habitats, be it in the old towns of Patan, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, or Bhaktapur, or in more remote places (beyond the Kathmandu Valley) like Nuwakot, Lamjung, or Solokhumbu. Most of the heritage sites documented are impacted by massive transformations in the city fabric, be this related to the aftermath of the 2015 earthquakes, to gentrification or informal densification, through encroachment or erosion. Others are affected by changing infrastructures (e.g., roads, airports) and changing trade patterns. Thus they reflect materialization and urbanization processes that can be witnessed across Asia and beyond. NHDP aims at documenting the historical and anthropological ‘biographies’ of such monuments as well as their current states and uses.

NHDP is even further enriched by the spirit with which many researchers and institutions have shared their (mostly unpublished) material related to tangible and intangible heritage. This includes close interaction with the impressive data collection of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT) as well as ties with the digital and open access John C. and Susan L. Huntington Architectural Archive of Buddhist Art. Moreover, the legacies and support of architects, architectural historians, and researchers documentation of Nepalese Arts and Monuments (DANAM). All of DANAM’s content is available to the public for free and can be accessed online. Its visual and textual materials are transferred to Heidelberg University Library for sustainable storage in its repositories of research data, heiIDICON and heiDATA. Datasets include structural information about the monuments’ histories. This is comprised of architectural, art historical, anthropological, and historical data; descriptions of monuments in English and Nepali; photographic documentation of monuments, objects (e.g., sculptures), and inscriptions; architectural details and measurements together with site plans, elevation drawings, and location maps; and maps of ritual processions and other thematic entries for heritage walks. These digital heritage walks, sometimes visualized in short videos, connect a set of particular architecture types, such as monasteries, arcaded rest-houses, or water architecture across the urban or rural space. They present selected thematic narratives that evolve around historical processes through a neighbourhhood, also bringing in a timeline of change, detailed documentation of rituals and road Mosaic, NHDP aims at transferring the findings to wider publics, for instance, by explaining how tangible and intangible heritage are condensed in ‘heritage focus areas’ – e.g., palace squares or special city quarters – to highlight the social, religious, and historical connectivity of sites across a particular locale instead of promoting individual sites as if they were contained and isolated places.

Over its running time of eight years, NHDP aims to document and inventory more than 1500 monuments, 2200 inscriptions, and 7000 objects, producing around 23,000 photographs and 1900 architectural drawings. Beyond this, it also highlights the unique intangible cultural heritage associated with the structures: rituals, festivals, and other historical, social, and religious events and practices. Thus, DANAM comprises four different databases: an architectural monument database, an art objects database, a historical database with inscriptions, and an anthropological database. The last of these is crucial for the understanding and documentation of intangible heritage and how it is intrinsically connected to built structures in Nepal.

NHDP’s team consists of architects trained in Nepal and Heidelberg, and historians who sometimes also work as anthropologists (Bharat Maharjan, Pankaj Nakarmi, Rovin Sharma, Rajendra Shukla), geographers (Rakesh Budhathoki), IT experts (Ashok Gautam, Bishnu Shah), and a chief administrator in Heidelberg (Radha Mallik). The team is led by Christiane Brosius, an anthropologist specializing in visual and media ethnology in urban India and Nepal, and Axel Michaels, an ethnologist specializing in South Asian rituals and religions, as well as Rajan Khatiwoda, an Indologist who coordinates the documentation work.

One example shall be sketched to highlight NHDP’s work: the Bhimasena Mandapa, located at the northern end of Patan Durbar Square in Lalitpur’s historic city. It serves as an exemplary case because its documentation not only created awareness and motivation to initiate the post-earthquake renovation process in 2018 but is also assisting its actual restoration work through the systematically recorded information in the DANAM. For example, the detailed maps and plans drawn and published under the NHDP have been used by the local government and other institutions involved in the renovation process. The temple, dedicated to the deity Bhimashena, was not destroyed in the 1934 earthquake but sustained heavy damaged during the 2015 earthquakes. Its carvings are remarkable, such as in the principal façade of the first floor or the sculptures supporting the broad overhanging roofs, displaying images of different deities. Bhimashena is a mythological character of Hindu mythology, worshiped as the god of trade in Newar society. The temple is lively, much frequented, and considered one of the ‘eight jewels’ on Patan Durbar Square. Constructed during the early Malla era (ca. 1200 CE), it was reconstructed in 1627 and 1681 CE by King Siddhinarasimha and King Śrīnivāsa Malla, respectively. Smaller and larger ritual sites are still taking place here, underlying the complementary relation of built and ephemeral heritage, its relevance for local residents rather than for tourists.

Continued overleaf
Cataloguing and editing documents of pre-modern Nepal (Documenta Nepalica)

From the late 18th century on, Nepal experienced a rapid and extensive increase in the production of paper documents serving the needs of the growing administrative and legal apparatus of the emerging nation-state formed in the wake of the conquests of the Shosh kings of Gorkha. The huge corpus – unique for South Asia and still extant in public and private archives throughout the country and abroad – includes hundreds of thousands of documents and offers a true kaleidoscope of officially administered records, as well as private ones. The project started under the lead of Axel Michaels in 2015, as a research unit of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. With teams in Heidelberg and Patan, it consists of the researchers Bajracharya, Simon Cubelic, and Ramhari Timsina; the deputy project leader Astrid Zottler; the head of the editorial program Christine Zottler; and the cataloguers and editors Rabi Acharya, Pabitra Bajracharya, and Yogesh Budathoki.

The Project

The Research Unit publishes the print-on-demand series “Documenta Nepalica – Book Series” by Heidelberg University Publishing. The first volume – Studies in Historical Documents from Nepal and India – is edited by Simon Cubelic, Axel Michaels, and Astrid Zottler (2018) and contains contributions by Dwarka Acharya, Manik Bajracharya, Rajan Khatiwoda, Gisle Kruaaskopi, Timothy Lubin, Charles Ramble, Alexander von Rospatt, and others. It aims at exploring and rethinking issues of diplomatics and typographical treatments of documents in relation to other texts and literary genres, methods of archiving and editing, geo-references, and published by play in social, religious, and political constellations.

The centre-piece of the academic endeavour is an open access and freely accessible database, called Documenta Nepalica. It features a catalogue with metadata for documents held by public institutions and private holders. The online catalogue provides access to over 60,000 documents, which have been documented, catalogued, and digitally edited and transcribed into a searchable and exploitable database.

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This project aims at investigating the crucial role that inscriptions play in the development of a lemmatizer that is trained to analyse the texts morpho-syntactically and thus contributes to the study of the lexicography and grammar of the still under-researched Nepali language. In a substantial number of cases, the data of Documenta Nepalica and NHDP are cross-referenced. The project started under the lead of Axel Michaels in 2020, as a research unit of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. With teams in Heidelberg and Patan, it consists of the research projects Bajracharya, Simon Cubelic, and Ramhari Timalsina; the deputy project leader Astrid Zottter; the head of the editorial program Christain Zotter; and the cataloguers and editors Rabil Acharya, Pabitra Bajracharya, and Yogesh Budhathoki.

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The second volume – The Mulki Ain of 18th: Nepal’s First Codification of Law – The Nepal’s First Comprehensive Translation of a Foundational Legal Text for Modern Nepal. It covers almost every aspect of public sector, criminal, private, and religious law, ranging from the organisation of the state and courts to murder and other delicts, the workings of the caste system and the joint family, matters of purdah and penance, customary law, widow-burning, and witchcraft. As such, the Mulki Ain is a unique source for the place of traditional Hindu jurisprudence in South Asian legal cultures.

Connecting written artefacts to social practices: the anthropology of inscriptions

This project aims at investigating the crucial role that inscriptions play—mobile and place-bound, graffiti or otherwise publicly displayed media of written communication—have played (and still play) for the construction of spaces, belonging, collective memory, and varieties of value in the Kathmandu Valley. A selected corpus of inscriptions has been documented, catalogued, and translated, as well as references and an edited, geo-referenced digital platform of the NHDP and the Research Unit “Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Premodern Nepal” besides a description of an inscriptions as text- and image-bearing objects, socio-religious practices connected to the inscriptions are also documented. A special focus is on inscriptions related to religious sites and the processional chariot of the Newar deity Bundgadhur. By drawing on methods from visual anthropology and phylology, the inscriptions are studied from an interdisciplinary and transnational perspective: as images and texts, as sediment of past meaning and sites of contemporary struggles, as historical objects embedded in monument sites, but also as literate practices through which ritual and festive activities are connected to heritage scapes. They help us to analyse the development of a lemmatizer that is trained to analyse the texts and thus contributes to the study of the lexicography and grammar of the still under-researched Nepali language. In a substantial number of cases, the data of Documenta Nepalica and NHDP are cross-referenced.

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