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Whose Security?

Regionalisation and Human Security at Borderland Airports in Asia

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In March 2015, an online aviation industry magazine highlighted an Asian airline route development forum held in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. In the photos depicting the ‘Signing Ceremony for Strategic Cooperation’, older men in suits – flanked by two young Chinese women in red qipao dresses – signed a Memorandum of Understanding (mou) with Yunnan Airport Group. The aim of the mou was to ‘enhance aviation activities in the province... and develop and enhance air connectivity and enhance infrastructure and business efficiency’ with Sri Lankan Airways, a Russian domestic carrier, two Canadian airports, and two other domestic carriers from within Yunnan province.¹ With dozens of similar conferences taking place annually, such agreements are not uncommon. However, what is new is the sheer increase in Asian air connectivity from smaller airports beyond the large international hubs of Beijing, Seoul-Incheon, Singapore Changi, and Tokyo-Narita; particularly from airports in borderland areas of Asia. Boeing, one of the world’s largest aviation multinationals, has reported that global air traffic growth in the next 20 years will be dominated by travel within Asia, much of which will be via newly inaugurated carriers (Boeing 2015: 23). Air connections within and out of Asia are increasing at a steady pace, with domestic airlines and low cost carriers such as Sichuan Airlines and Spice Jet connecting Chiang Mai to Chengdu, or Madurai to Muscat. In contrast to only a decade or two ago, these new connections do not only serve the mobile elite. The economic ‘rise’ of Asia – in particular China and India – over the past two decades has spurred new kinds of regional pathways, in conjunction with significant changes in labour mobility, state policies, and migration. On one of the many direct flights from

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Kathmandu to Kuala Lumpur, for example, one may find lower-middle class traders, domestic labourers, construction workers, university students, and groups of lower-middle class Chinese tourists, travelling for work, education, or tourism. In tandem with these new kinds of connections, the governments of China and India have been investing heavily in infrastructural projects, including the expansion of existing airports and routes in what is often seen as the peripheries of both countries: Assam in northeast India, and Yunnan in southwest China.

But how are these relatively small borderland airports key to regional security? In addition to larger free trade blocs in the name of regional integration – such as ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) or SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) – many new economic alliances with their centres in borderlands have been established by Asian states, focusing specifically on cross-border infrastructural integration. For example, the impetus of the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) Economic Corridor is to strengthen infrastructural connections in order to achieve more ‘growth potential’ in the margins of states that have not been formally connected by air, rail, or road since the 20th century due to conflicts such as the Sino-Indian War that closed off the borders between China and India (although parts of these borderlands have been culturally and linguistically linked for centuries) (Rahman and Amin 2009: 4). But borderland areas like Northeast India are often considered ‘weak’ by states, precisely because they are ‘...troublesome neighbours, [have] a neglected population, weak economy, and partial socio-cultural integration with rest of India’ (Mathur 2011). Here, infra-structural expansion is thus being developed in both Yunnan and Assam precisely under the rubric of improving both regional and state stability and security.

In this paper, based on a combination of secondary source information and policy documentation, we argue that the expansion of borderland infrastructural projects in the name of regional integration leads to complex consequences for the people who make these infrastructural expansions possible. The rhetoric is that regional security is improving human security in borderland areas in the form of job creation or investment in local land. For instance, the first point of contact for investment in fixed capital like an airport is often the local population whose land has been purchased by the airport. Similarly, a rise in the recruitment of ground, retail, and cleaning staff reflects the recruitment of new labour for anticipated future movement across new regional links. These developments are all said to lead to greater security, but the question is whose security? In order to explore these issues, we begin with a brief background on security discourses and airport infrastructure, then a more in-depth look at how the expansion of airport infrastructure plays out in two areas: Assam and Yunnan. In this way, we aim to lay the ground for future ethnographic fieldwork that explores in more depth precisely how those who live and work at these sites of infrastructural expansion experience these changes.

State-centred security and human security

What do we mean by ‘security’ in the first place? Conventionally, the concept of security – loosely defined as being free from threat – has been seen from
the perspective of the state, where security is provided for the citizens solely by the state which at the same time legitimises its sovereignty. In discussing security, some scholars focus on military affairs, designed to guard the security of the nation from external military threats (for example Youkang 2001). Others widen the concept of collective or national security to broader issues like illicit drug trade (Engvall 2006), national health (Heymann 2003), and economic crises (Krasniqi 2010). These scholars define security as a ‘response to anything that can be persuasively identified as posing a threat to the very existence of the state or society’ (Goldstein 2010: 489-490). As a critical response to these state-centrist perspectives and in order to focus on what security means to people, including groups that transcend national borders, a human security discourse has emerged over the last few decades. The term ‘human security’ was first adopted in the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994. According to this report, human security means ‘…first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, in jobs or in communities’ (UNDP 1994: 23).

According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, this human security discourse can usefully be applied to issues of ‘social cohesion and integration, stability and collective identity’ (Eriksen 2010: 2). Similarly, human security can act as a helpful framework for looking at the effects of global issues on local ‘particularities’ (for example human rights violations, terrorism and infectious diseases) that the state-centrist concept of security cannot effectively grasp, and which applies specifically to experiences that transcend state borders (Winslow 2003: 2). Nevertheless, this notion of human security has generated significant criticism, as it has been seen as too broad, vague, and arbitrary (Alkire 2003; Newman 2010). Ellen Bal and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff suggest that ‘in order to be meaningful, human security needs to be narrowed down to individual senses of insecurity on the various dimensions (economic, cultural, psychological, physical, etc.) that matter to people’ (2010: 91). To build a stronger framework of human security, these various dimensions need to be examined in greater detail, without denying their interconnectedness. In this paper, we follow Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff by focussing on how broader, state-centric visions of infrastructure expansion can impact specific local senses of security; in the case of Assam and Yunnan, concerns over job and land security are brought to the fore. In this way, we hope to illustrate that concerns about ‘security’ are not simply about crises and conflicts that suddenly erupt, but are also about longer-term insecurities that develop in relation to projects that are intended on some level to be for the benefit of an abstract intra-Asian collaboration. Here, Goldstein’s call for a critical security anthropology is a helpful framework in order to situate ‘local realities within broader national and transnational contexts to examine the mutually constitutive effects of each on the other’ (Goldstein 2010: 489). By asking ‘whose security?’, we aim to show how the hierarchical framing of ‘security’ through regional integration schemes is done in the name of increasing local economic security through job opportunities, but in fact is more often a push for strengthening national security.

To examine this process, we have made use of
secondary source ethnographic material and several policy statements. However, follow-up ethnographic field research and interviews are crucial to expanding the depth of the project. One of the authors with significant prior experience in the region will begin such work in winter 2015-2016. This paper thus serves as an initial exploration into the ways that regional integration policies are tied to infrastructural growth. However, it has been noted that taking an anthropological approach to these infrastructures is methodologically difficult. One of the reasons for this is that they are considered ‘unruly’; assemblages that have no clear end point. According to Brian Larkin, ‘what distinguishes infrastructures from technologies is that they are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems’ (2013: 329). Yet a study of infrastructure is useful in that it can ‘offer insights into other domains such as practices of government, religion, or sociality’ (Larkin 2013: 328), exposing ‘fragile relations between people, things, and the institutions (both public and private) that seek to govern them’.2 In this sense, anthropological issues such as state understandings of national and regional space as well as ethnic belonging and difference are clearly brought to the fore. We believe that looking at Bajc and de Lint’s notion of ‘meta-frames’ for security in the form of huge trade initiatives like BCIM (or ASEAN, or BIMSTEC, for that matter) and policy can help in outlining how the hierarchies of security frameworks are imposed and work in practice (Bajc and de Lint 2013; Bok 2015). Before on the ground research is implemented, this preliminary glimpse into how regional integration schemes might manifest locally may open up more inquiries into how best to combine studies of foreign policy with anthropological research, both empirically and methodologically.

Border infrastructures, regional and national security in India and China

Over the last few decades, there has been a considerable transition in security-thinking in Asia. By the end of the Cold War, the main focus of the majority of Asian security policies began to shift towards increasing territorial connectivity and regional institutionalisation. Improved regional infrastructure connections and multilateral institutions were meant to strengthen national security, specifically in relation to conflict prevention as well as for economic security: to accommodate rapidly expanding markets in Asia. Four of the five principles of India’s foreign policy, mentioned by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a conference in 2013, illustrate this line of thinking: (1) the creation of ‘a global environment that is conducive to the well-being of India’, (2) ‘greater integration with the world economy’, (3) ‘stable, long-term and mutually-beneficial relations with all major powers, and… a global economic and security environment beneficial to all’, and (4) ‘greater regional cooperation and connectivity’.3

These principles largely stem from India’s ‘Look East Policy’, which was developed in 1991 and focuses on regional cooperation with Asian countries to the east of India. Initially this new policy stimulated a strengthening of trade connections with ASEAN countries. Following the growth of East Asian economies,
from 2003 onwards the Indian government also began to incorporate Japan, China and Korea into its future policy planning, which led to a significant increase in trade with those countries. The Look East Policy has set up four objectives: regional economic integration, reform and liberalisation, sustained economic growth, and development of the north-eastern region of India (cf. Haokip 2011: 251). It is this last objective – one that has only been drafted recently – that concerns us here. From the perspective of the state, the hilly north-eastern region (NER) of India is seen as relatively underdeveloped, and its diverse ethnic groups – some of whom share close connections with similar groups in Myanmar, Bhutan, Tibet, Bangladesh, and Nepal – are often perceived as homogenous perpetrators of anti-nationalist insurgencies and separatist movements. With the Look East Policy – converted to the ‘Act East Policy’ in 2014 – Indian political leaders aim to develop this region into a ‘gateway to the East’, stimulated by the improvement and expansion of pipelines, roads, railways and air connections (Haokip 2011: 252-253). These very infrastructural investments that foster intra-Asian economic cooperation are simultaneously part of a national security project to ‘bring the northeast into the mainstream’ and to quell a generic unrest that is in reality by no means unified or shared by the entire region (Baruah 2007: 3).

Like the government of India, Chinese leaders view economic cooperation and development as an important vehicle for regional security. According to a position paper on China’s New Security Concept in 2002, economic cooperation has improved the ‘mutual exchange, mutual trust and cooperation between all parties involved, thus contributing to the security and stability of the region’ (China Report 2003: 130-131). In order to ensure this regional security and stability, the Chinese party aims to build its south-western province Yunnan into a ‘cooperative bridge between China, Southeast Asia and South Asia’ (Summers 2012: 455). This borderland province, like India’s north-eastern region, has strong historical and cultural connections with other parts in South Asia and Southeast Asia, seen by the central Chinese government as both beneficial and precarious at the same time. While these regional networks might ease regional cooperation, they may also threaten ‘loyalty’ to the government in mainland China. By improving and constructing infrastructure connections between Yunnan, South and Southeast Asia, and the rest of China – something that the leaders of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have attempted to do since the mid-1980s (Eng 1998: 453) – the Chinese government aims to boost its economy and strengthen ties between the province and mainland China (Summers 2012).

To exemplify, one of these regional economic collaborations – BCIM – features both northeast India and southwest China at its heart. From 1999 onwards, the aspirations of both the Indian and Chinese governments to cooperate with neighbouring states have been consolidated in the form of a regional integration scheme, called the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) Forum for Regional Economic Co-operation. Although India and China are already members of multiple regional fora, a properly “regional” perspective on trans-border connectivity still appears to be lacking’ in those collaborations (Ubooi 2014: 13). BCIM, with Chinese and Indian borderlands at its centre, is slightly different. By focussing on infrastruc-
ture connections, BCIM aims to stimulate trade and economic development, which are perceived to strengthen economic security within its member countries (Uberoi 2014: 2). Although the form of an economic corridor (EC), implies straightforward ‘linear connectivity’ between infrastructural nodes; in practice, its many arteries cross uneven terrain and are extremely fragmented, with roads washed away due to monsoons and huge differences in income disparity and population density (Uberoi 2014: 12). Moreover, such a top-down implementation prompts the question whether the ‘benefits of the BCIM-EC will be equitably shared – between countries, between ethnic groups, between classes, indeed, even between men and women?’ (2014: 12). Such kinds of questions bring us closer to connecting huge macro-level regional schemes – usually dealt with through the fields of international relations and foreign policy – to actual social experiences of infrastructural expansion.

In a 2011 article, a former Indian foreign secretary stated that ‘the progress in cross-border infrastructure must never outpace the all-round integration of our frontier regions with the rest of the country. If this happens, it will be a recipe for alienation in these sensitive frontier regions, endangering our security’ (Mathur 2011: 286). As Emily Yeh has written in her book, Taming Tibet, the ‘gift’ of economic development and infrastructure works in a hegemonic way, tying Tibetans closer to mainland China, a move that is supposed to lead to overall stability (Yeh 2013: 242). Here, regional integration goes hand-in-hand with national integration. In the case of the NEER, the ‘our’ in ‘our security’ is often that of a Delhi-centric India, not attuned to both the existing cross-border ties with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Tibet and the uneven experiences of numerous ethnic, religious, and political factions with no single unifying goal. Such large-scale regional integration programs are perceived to improve regional and national security (both in terms of conflict prevention and economic security), and are also seen to enhance local economic security in the sense of job creation and increased trading links. However, in practice, trans-regional airport and air linkage development may actually weaken job and land security within the range of the airport itself.

Jobs, land, and airport expansion in Northeast India (GAU)

How are the links between infrastructural expansion and security framed at a specific borderland airport? Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport (IATA code: GAU), is located 28 km to the west of the city of Guwahati in the state of Assam. GAU is the only international airport serving the eight northeast states of India: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. Bordered by China, Myanmar, and Bhutan, the region lies in the foothills of Himalayas, and up until fairly recently, much of Assam was accessible by private or military helicopter and not by passenger planes. Although GAU is an international airport, connected to Bhutan and Thailand through carrier Druk Air, the Airports Authority of India (AAI) and the state of Assam are planning to expand Guwahati into a much larger hub for international Asian travel over the next decade. Starting with Thailand and Bangladesh, the
most recent infrastructural planning schemes via the ‘Act East Policy’ and BIM is that these connections will turn the northeast region (NER) into a new hub at the centre of South and Southeast Asia. And yet, as mentioned above, policy reports warn that while the ‘NER can serve as a hub of regional commerce, a stronger domestic NER connect with the rest of the country is essential, so that the NER can function as a major driver in its own development process’ (Juergens 2014, emphasis added).6

The northeast has been marked by dynamic increases in mobility over the past ten years or so. The increase in migration flows are out of the northeast to other parts of urban India but also the Gulf States, China and Southeast Asia; partly as a result of separatist movements, partly as a result of decrease in agricultural work in the region and more highly-skilled employment opportunities elsewhere (McDuie-Ra 2013; Angelova 2015). Moreover, while the considerable migration of youth out of this region has increased, there is a considerable lack of new semi-skilled jobs for those who remain, leaving Assam with a high unemployment rate. Individuals from the northeast also face tremendous discrimination in other parts of India – not just because they do not look stereotypically ‘Indian’ – but also because of their tribal backgrounds. As a result, they are sometimes immediately marked as separatists (McDuie-Ra 2012).

Against this backdrop, two local groups – airport workers and agriculturalists – are negotiating their positions in relation to the GAU expansion. Guwahati is on the AAI list of six major Indian airports to be privatised in the next few years. Part of these modernising efforts involve what Gillian Fuller has called the ‘anticipatory architecture’ of the airport – that it is rarely complete and always angled towards future connections (Fuller 2009: 68). And yet, in 2013, and again in 2015, GAU airport workers have demonstrated and have gone on strike due to significant job security concerns. This is due to both the privatisation plans as well as consequences related to airport expansion such as major pushes to increase efficiency management and turnover time. In one qualitative study of several airports in Assam, it was found that employees ‘are over burdened with additional works required to perform the works in the airport’. Similarly, ‘sufficient staff quarters are not available and quality rented houses are not found near the airports, for which sometimes manpower management become difficult’ (Dutta and Sharma 2012: 203). In addition, the local agriculturalists who are residents around the airport area are also concerned about increased expansion plans. The local residents’ committee has written to the Airports Authority of India (AAI) to cease further land acquisition in the vicinity of the airport – stating that there is now a shortage of agricultural and residential land around the airport. They write that ‘if the Union ministry of civil aviation hands over the LGI airport to private firms, then it is crystal clear that the...motive is to deprive the poor cultivators who had donated their lands for construction of the airport in exchange of a modest amount of money...who gave away their lands in the national interest over the years’ (Times of India, 9 April, 2014). It is in these specific cases that the broad framework of regional integration begins to unravel. Representatives of agriculturalists have reported that the cultivators have given up their land ‘in the national interest’, yet this ‘national interest’ may not adequately
accommodate their local job and land security. By expanding the airport for cross-border connections and a strengthened national economy, the airport becomes symbolic of how potential economic growth literally flies out of the region. Although the citizens of the NER sit right in the centre of the new regional ‘economic corridor’, they are being bypassed.

As the airport expands to accommodate increased migration flows and new networks on a regional scale, the workers who live locally now have to travel farther to get to their jobs at the airport, as do the agriculturalists who need to travel a longer way around the airport to get to their fields. Such spatial unevenness follows Cindi Katz’s notion of time-space expansion (as opposed to compression, where the increased connections of globalization are said to produce the sensation that the world is shrinking) among certain groups as a direct result of development projects (Katz 2001). Working in or next to an international airport produces a different relationship with rapid trans-Asian infrastructural change in contrast to travelling through an airport. As Mimi Sheller has said: ‘airports produce not just spatial concentration and connectivity, but also spatial distantiation and barriers to access. If they are like cities, they are splintered cities’ (Graham and Marvin 2001: 272; Sheller 2010). Such barriers to access produce threats to job security – while the expansion of the airport is supposed to increase employment and business in the region.

Thus, these processes are not just about increases in economic connectivity on a regional and national scale, but about the lesser-studied obstacles to this kind of connectivity and mobility as well, especially on a more micro-level scale, with serious consequences for livelihood security (Secor 2007; Sheller 2010; Burrell 2011; Harris 2013; Cowen 2014). Nothing says ‘regional integration and connection’ more than an international airport in Asia, but to what extent does it actually increase the connectivity of local people? In one sense, the rhetoric that Gau should be a hub for new South-East Asian connections is aligned with the argument that northeast Indians have against the hegemonic pull of the state of India. In other words, this part of India is marked by separatist movements and out-migration patterns precisely because it has been neglected by the Indian state, where people find themselves more often (at least culturally) aligned with cross-border ethnic groups in Myanmar and Bangladesh. It is common to hear people say things like: ‘Delhi doesn’t understand what it is like to live in this part of the country’ or ‘Delhi never pays attention to us’ (Harris 2013). Instead, we argue that Delhi is paying attention to the NER, but for several very different reasons: first, with the push for increased air and infrastructural connections through the BCIM alliance, the NER becomes akin to a stepping stone for states to obtain access to each other’s markets. Secondly, regional integration provides the impetus for domestic strengthening – connecting the northeast paradoxically means pulling it closer to the state of India. Ultimately, the consequences of these new geopolitical linkages are acutely felt by those such as the workers and farmers at Gau, the very people who make these links work in the first place. This has similarities to how increased infrastructure connections are experienced by the local population in Yunnan, to which we will turn in the following section.
National integration, land, and job security in Southwest China

Since the mid-1980s, many investments have been made in Yunnan (a province in the southwest of China) in order to improve its infrastructural connections. This was part of a twofold strategy: on the one hand it had the national goal to connect Yunnan more closely to the rest of China, yet on the other hand it was aimed at stimulating economic growth through improved regional connections. Like India’s borderlands, Yunnan is a province with many different ethnic minorities (unlike China’s mainland where the Han ethnicity is in the majority) and close historical and cultural connections to other parts in South Asia and Southeast Asia. From the 1990s onwards, China’s central government began to promote the improvement of infrastructures between Yunnan and the rest of China. As much of the funding for these infrastructures came from Beijing, the province’s financial dependence on the central government increased (Summers 2013: 181). As a consequence of these improved connections, tourism, investment, and entrepreneurism from mainland China grew and tied Yunnan closer to the rest of China in terms of economic dependency.

The regional goal of infrastructure improvement was aimed at stimulating economic growth, both nationally and locally. Yunnan is China’s only province that is bordered by three Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. From the 1980s, the Yunnanese provincial government decided to make use of this beneficial geographic location to improve infrastructural connections with its bordering countries (and later via air connections) in order to stimulate trade and tourism – both international and more recently also domestic tourism (Eng 1998; Hillman 2003; Morais et al. 2006). In a short period, large investments were made in the improvement and construction of roads, railways and airports. Since the 1990s, Yunnan has constructed eight airports and substantively expanded Kunming Airport. These improved connections quickly achieved the goal of an increase in tourism: the number of overseas tourists in Yunnan rose from 1,299 to 34.76 million between 1978 and 2005, while the number of domestic tourists grew from 0.13 million to 6.86 billion (Yunnan Tourism Bureau, in Yang and Wall 2014: 76). The infrastructure projects and subsequent increase in tourism had significant consequences for the human security of individual Yunnanese. Although these developments have many varied impacts, ranging from the re-creation of ethnic identities (Davis 2003) to environmental issues (for example Yang et al. 2009), we focus here on the consequences for land and job security. While the case of Yunnan undoubtedly needs more on the ground exploration, ethnographic secondary sources can provide a strong basis from which to investigate these local consequences of infrastructure expansion.

Since large parcels of land are needed for the construction of new infrastructure projects and additional facilities for tourism, a large part of the Yunnanese population were recently asked to sell their land or leave their homes. The impact of the large land grab for infrastructure projects can be illustrated with Paul Howard’s analysis of Landsat images between 2006 and 2012 of a terrain to the south of an airport road in Xishuangbanna, south Yunnan. In this period of six years, the large area of crop land has made way for
high-rise buildings and other infrastructure mainly constructed for tourists and residences for mainland Chinese entrepreneurs (Howard 2014: 42). The land needed for these kind of constructions is usually owned by the local villagers themselves. Local governments, the main initiators of infrastructure development, often force the farmers to sell their land for these projects. Here the farmers usually get the short end of the stick: in the case of the expansion of Xishuangbanna the land was bought from the villagers for 30,000 yuan per mu (one mu is approximately 667 square metres) and sold to developers for 150,000 per mu. In addition, the farmers had used these lands for growing rice, and they now had to find another way of gathering income (Evans 2000: 171). Although the development of these parcels of land did indeed create new job opportunities for nearby residents, it appears that this does not always resolve the intricate problems of employment insecurity.

Those ‘in the way’ of infrastructure development often experience negative impacts on their land security, but it would be inaccurate to treat them as completely passive victims. Xiaolin Guo has illustrated how villagers of a township in northeast Yunnan resisted the creation of a so-called ‘development zone’, a zone aimed at attracting industrial and commercial investment, for which 850 mu of land had to be expropriated. One of the projects for which this land was needed was the building of a ring road, which compelled over 300 people to relocate. The villagers protested by spreading petitions, raising funds, uniting with protesters from other villages and even trying to have their issues broadcasted on national television. Unfortunately, their actions were in vain as their village was bulldozed within a couple of months. And yet, according to Guo, even though many villagers were affected by this land expropriation, the majority of the villagers had not taken action because of their economic dependence on the township officials whom the activists were criti-cising (Guo 2001: 431-434). This resonates with how other Yunnanese react to land expropriations for development or infrastructure projects. Another reason why most people do not resist is because they are lured by the short-term benefits of land expropriation, such as rent and compensation (Wu et al. 2011). Nevertheless, in the longer term, other effects of weakened land security are likely to increase, such as a future food shortage, since the ‘decrease in food production might not be able to support the growing and enriching Yunnanese population’ (Howard 2014: 42).

In terms of job security, initially it looked like the infrastructure expansions and consequential increase in tourism in Yunnan brought along a substantive number of new jobs. Many locals have shifted from being farmers to becoming employed as tour guides, stage performers, transport workers, waiters, cooks, or as shopkeepers of ‘ethnic’ souvenir shops. Next to that, many Yunnanese people earn money by changing their homes into hotels, restaurants and internet cafes (Chow 2005: 299-300). Nevertheless, minority locals often are restricted to the lowest paid jobs because of their low education in comparison to the majority Han people, who have also moved to Yunnan to benefit from the increased tourism (Yang 2011: 328). Entrepreneurship and management in the tourism sector have largely been taken up by mainland Han businessmen, whose access to Yunnan has eased with the improvement of infrastructure.
An illustration of the disproportionate job and income division between Han entrepreneurs and locals in the Yunnanese tourism sector can be found in Yang and Wall’s study of ethnic tourism and entrepreneurship in Xishuangbanna (2008). Here it is shown that many tourist villages in Xishuangbanna are turned into ethnic theme parks by joint-venture companies, following the government-supported joint-business model, ‘enterprise plus village households’. This model encourages cooperation between companies and villages, in which the enterprise invests in tourism facilities, roads and other infrastructure construction, while the village households provide access to their resources, including housing, landscapes, their ‘traditional lifestyles’ and land. In turn, the villagers are promised that they will benefit from employment created by the growth in tourism. However, according to Yang and Wall, there is an unbalanced relationship between companies and villages. The ‘enterprise plus village households’ model allows the enterprises to assume responsibility for the villages and surroundings, which results in the extraction of most economic benefits by the ethnic theme park owners, while the villagers lose control over their resources. On top of that, many companies are reported to break their promises, like the paving of village roads (Yang and Wall 2008: 534). As a result, the Han investors receive most of the economic benefits of ethnic tourism (ibid.: 531).

The people who work in the tourism sector often find themselves in marginalized and exploited positions. In ‘Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages’, an ethnic theme park in Kunming, for example, the minority employees are said to be treated like factory workers, living in cramped dormitories and imposed by strict company policies. These workers live in small rooms, often together with four or five other people. The strict company policies imply that the workers have almost no possibilities in voicing critiques of the park management (Yang 2011: 327). In an interview, a park employee explains that workers ‘feel like living in a prison’, as the dorm closes at 11pm every night; employees will be locked out if they’re not in on time and their wages will be reduced if they are absent (ibid.: 325).

The mainland Han investors, whose presence in Yunnan was facilitated by improved infrastructure connections with the rest of China, are thus usually the prime beneficiaries of the booming tourism industry. At the same time, Yunnan remains dependent on these entrepreneurs from mainland China for investments in infrastructure development and other tourist facilities to boost the economy (for example Yang and Wall 2008, 2009; Wu et al. 2011). However, as in the case of northeast India, the goal of local economic development has been bypassed for national economic security. And although the amount of jobs and incomes have increased, some forms of income generation have been weakened while new ones – such as jobs in an ethnic park – are insecure and on the least beneficial end of the employment spectrum (Yang and Wall 2009: 86). Once again, whose security is it that policies of regional infrastructure development seek to improve? As we have shown here, although one of the main aims of strengthening infrastructure connections is the improvement of economic security in the borderlands, the push for national security appears to trump these aims.
Conclusion

As of July 2015, infrastructural improvements along the BCIM corridor are being bumped up to the top of the priority lists of China and India’s economic and foreign affairs. The shared discourse expressed by politicians from both nations is that this kind of large-scale regional cooperation is necessary for the increase in cross-border economic connections, which will eventually improve economic security and social development-in-general in the region. It is here where the vague, broad, and arbitrary use of the term ‘security’ is in fact key to understanding the uneven experiences of infrastructural expansion. Regional infrastructure schemes like BCIM impose a ‘vision of order on a grand scale’, painting an impression of unimpeded, linear cross-border exchange between nation-states (Baje and de Lint 2013: 11). A critical look at BCIM, ASEAN, and BIMSTEC as frames for security can help us understand how the notion of security itself can become flattened and all-encompassing through the push for freer trade, spearheaded by individual nation-states. In the borderlands of Asia, macro regional integration programmes boast the improvement of economic opportunities for citizens by creating conditions that promote these opportunities for the nation, whilst simultaneously threatening them on a level closer to the infrastructure itself.

Baje and de Lint’s ‘meta-framing’ approach is important for several reasons: first, anthropologists tend to shy away from the study of multi-nation integration initiatives where the domain of discourse almost always stems from the perspective of bounded nation-states. This is particularly true for most of the literature that deals with these initiatives, in the field of international relations or foreign policy. It is our hope that closer connections between these kinds of mega-policies and experiences of infrastructural transformation in borderlands can be forged in the near future. As a large body of scholarly material on these large-scale policies already exists, it may help to highlight the interlinkages and tensions between meta-frames like regional integration schemes and the implementation of these policies from a more ethnographic perspective. Second, and drawing on this, those who work or live in the vicinity of the expanding, anticipatory architecture of the airport experience rapid shifts in labour and living conditions and opportunities. Although these shifts may be positive in the form of job generation, these experiences – characterized by immobility, emotional dissonance, and time space expansion – often stand in stark contrast to the symbolism of the international air hub, a bastion of rapid global connectivity. Third, while the borderlands of both northeast India and southwest China appear to emerge as new centralities via strategies such as BCIM, this is the clear result of a market-driven turn which ultimately benefits those at the higher echelons of state power. Nevertheless, this remains a preliminary and exploratory study of what it means to look at the issue of ‘security-in-general’ via the discourse of regional security frameworks. This kind of project therefore warrants more long-term, in-depth field research on local experiences – both positive and negative – of Asian infrastructural expansion.

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Notes

4 China’s New Security Concept, introduced in 1996, was designed to shift policy from a traditional military security perspective to regional cooperation on ‘non-traditional’ issues (for example piracy, terrorism and drug trade) (Foot 2005: 145).
5 For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) (China), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (India) and The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (India).

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