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[Humans and the Environment in Kyrgyzstan: Political Ecology in a Postcolonial and Postsocialist Context]

Author: Maurer, Martin

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Mensch und Umwelt in Kirgistan: Politische Ökologie im postkolonialen und postsozialistischen Kontext

**[Humans and the Environment in
Kyrgyzstan: Political Ecology in
a Postcolonial and
Postsocialist Context]**

By Matthias Schmidt. Stuttgart,
Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag,
2013. 400 pp. € 52.00, US\$ 79.80.
ISBN 978-3-515-10478-4.

Political ecology explores the impact of political systems on the utilization and management of environmental and natural resources. In this book, Matthias Schmidt uses the theoretical toolset provided by political ecology to analyze how the systemic and radical economic and political changes experienced by Central Asia's post-Soviet transformation societies influence interrelationships between humans and environmental determinants. In addition to exploring the theoretical background, he focuses strongly on how resource management has developed under changing external conditions in some villages in the walnut forests of southwestern Kyrgyzstan. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has designated this entire region, with its walnut and fruit trees, as a World Heritage Site. The region deserves particular attention because its entire ecosystem is under serious threat of destruction from human activities. This book has the potential to uncover interrelationships and the political and historical dimensions behind the gradual loss of forestry resources in this part of the world.

Schmidt approaches the subject step by step, first clarifying terms, definitions, and the methodological toolset of political ecology and then describing and analyzing the political

changes that took place during the early times of the nomadic and sedentary societies populating the region we now call Central Asia. After portraying events and conditions that occurred during the rule of the khans of Kokand, he thoroughly explores the shift of political interests that followed the occupation of the former khanate's territory by the Russian Empire; this is followed by an in-depth discussion of the radical changes that took place after the October Revolution and after the Russian Bolsheviks seized political power. Then, the author focuses on more recent developments, analyzing the post-Soviet transformation process and illustrating his analysis with rich and detailed information on forestry communities in the Bazar Korgon and Suzak Districts of Kyrgyzstan, based on qualitative and quantitative primary data. This enables the reader to understand how past developments have led to the current situation in this specific case.

The book includes a comprehensive and thoroughly researched bibliography that emphasizes the theoretical, historical, and political research background, both in general terms and with a specific focus on Central Asia. The bibliography is complemented by historical and recent maps of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, and the area of the forest communities studied.

The highly sophisticated introduction to the theory of political ecology highlights environmental and ecological ideas and models, as well as concepts of colonialism and theories of political science, such as in relation to the controversial term "transformation," which is frequently used in discussions aiming to describe the present situation of post-Soviet societies. Here, Schmidt draws critical attention to the presupposition of many researchers that the necessity of political development from a "worse" type of political framework to a "better" (democratic) one in future. This discussion seems a little too sophisticated and is perhaps

not entirely relevant to the author's research aim of explaining the impacts of human interactions on environmental resources. In addition, there is no background information on theories of holistic and interdisciplinary village and livelihood systems research, which could have complemented the methodological toolset for the analysis of interactions between external (eg political and administrative) factors and utilization of land and water resources for production of agricultural and forestry products. Such a methodological framework would have offered useful additional tools, particularly for analyzing current problems in the walnut forest area.

While the theoretical introduction offers a rich set of tools, the main emphasis of the book is on the detailed exploration of the historical interdependencies that led to the current situation of resource utilization. The description of historical developments during the early times of nomadic and sedentary human activities before the appearance of the first khanate of Kokand is sparse because of the limited availability of literature. But the subsequent discussion of society during the era of the khan rulers is one of the most interesting parts of the book. The author gives a lot of attention to the pattern of tribal communities and describes in detail how interrelationships among families, clans, and tribes functioned. An extensive discussion of the differences between nomadic and sedentary structures shows very well how attitudes towards family and clan relationships, as well as land rights and resource utilization were established during this period. Some of these elements continue to have an influence on contemporary behavioral attitudes. The problem of corruption, discussed as a central issue in modern times in the last chapters of the book, can be linked to tribal obligations and relationships between clan and family members during the pre-Russian period.

However, Schmidt does not determine how these structures were handed down from the tsarist and Bolshevik eras until today. This would have been interesting, because clan awareness is a strong determinant of current political behavior.

Schmidt also devotes considerable attention to the political forces and political intentions of the Russian Empire and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which had a great impact on land use patterns, resource use, and traditional systems of the nomadic people in the region. Although environmental protection and the term “ecology” did not play determining roles during those periods, Schmidt explains nicely how political interests nonetheless protected the walnut forests—now recognized as a World Heritage Site—in the southwestern parts of today’s Kyrgyz Republic: The survival of this watershed at the edge of the intensively cultivated cotton area of the Ferghana Valley enjoyed top priority because of its

significance for irrigation and hence for the cotton economy.

Discussion of the utilization of forests, pastures, and other arable land in the walnut forest study area is introduced early in the book. In the final chapter, a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary status and ongoing developments offers the reader a rare opportunity to understand the problems of land and resource management under fragile environmental conditions in Kyrgyzstan. Not only political and ecological interlinkages but also thoroughly researched production parameters, economic factors, and social and administrative rules and regulations are presented, discussed, and analyzed. Nevertheless, in this final chapter, some readers will probably miss an overview of the general determinants of contemporary land and water resource use in Central Asia or, at least, in the broader context of Kyrgyzstan. While earlier chapters focus on the development

of Central Asia as a whole, Schmidt largely neglects regional aspects when discussing contemporary issues.

Aside from some discontinuity among the highly sophisticated theoretical introduction, the regionwide analysis of historical developments, and the locally focused analysis of the contemporary situation, this book is a great opportunity for researchers and experts to gain in-depth knowledge of the various topics it discusses. In some aspects, it may even serve as a kind of compendium, because there is little comparable literature for Kyrgyzstan.

AUTHOR

Martin Maurer

martinklaus.maurer@gmail.com
Agricultural Management and Farming Systems
Research, Kyrgyz National Agrarian University
(KNAU), 720005 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

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