There is almost no doubt that it was capitalism – and not ideology or any specific country – that ‘won the Cold War’ (Hann 2017), and hence the collapse of the Soviet bloc opened up new spaces for the expansion of capital. It was proposed that capitalism in the post-Soviet context should work along western lines: Russian economists, experts and politicians in an alliance with the IMF chose the neo-liberal American type of capitalism as the primary model for Russia’s transition to the market (Lane 2007). However, since the 1990s, the transition model has undergone significant changes, and there is ample evidence that post-Soviet capitalism is very different from the original ideas and from the state of affairs in other capitalist countries (Hall & Soskice 2001; Hann 2002, to cite but a few). In fact, a single model is not capable of either producing or explaining the variety of forms that capitalism takes in the real world. There is evidence that even in the centre of the capitalist world – in the USA – there are very different, local forms of economic assemblage which have nothing to do with the simplifying logic of the totalising market (Tsing 2015).

The articles in this special section aim to demonstrate the diversity of capitalist logics found in cases we have examined in Russian Inner Asia. The forms of capitalism we discuss are diverse, and there are many reasons why this is the case. Perhaps the most important is that capital comes to the Eastern peripheries from diverse sources: Russian agro-holdings, the Russian state and international mining companies. Sometimes capitalist relations also ‘grow on their own’, emerging from the practices of hunters and fishermen or travellers and tourists in the Siberian taiga. Furthermore, each of our stories reveals that some of the capital on Russia’s eastern fringes is of Chinese origin. We posit that, whatever the origin of the capital, the emergent economic organisms do not turn out to be pure ‘Chinese’ (as one might imagine reading Zhou 2016) or plainly ‘Russian’ economic structures. On the contrary, the nascent organisms growing in the Siberian cultural landscape, remaking it and mixing with it, intertwining with other capitals, objects, practices, present ‘impure’
assemblages, bundles of capitalist and non-capitalist relationships that are continuously changing and rewriting themselves.

Our cases span from the Oka River basin (a remote district of the Republic of Buryatia of the same name), the Khomutovsky agricultural district located near Lake Baikal, the Novoalekseevka village located on the Zeya-Bureya plain, and Chinese farms located in the Middle Amur and Pre-Khanka lowlands; hence, we focus on rural areas. Recent development shows that non-capitalist peasantry is fading everywhere: agro-industrial capitalists appropriate lands from former small farmers and incorporate them into the industrial system (Dudley 2002). Are there any specificities in such land-grabbing and industrial incorporation in the regions studied? Using assemblage thinking (Li 2017), Ivanov reveals how incorporation occurs if the ‘robber capitalist’ is a large Chinese state-owned company implementing the state’s own strategic decisions while the incorporated subject is a small Chinese farmer working at his own risk on land in a foreign country. Ivanov describes emerging farm-capital-labour regimes on the Russian border with China. It would be easy to claim that it is the well-known neoliberalisation or the financialisation of agriculture that is responsible for the emerging – and hidden – assemblages. However, neoliberalism generally defines the withdrawal of protections for workers, environment and consumers combined with the protection of corporations, private property or contracts. Financialisation of farming usually just describes land becoming a speculative asset. In his case, however, Ivanov scrutinises the farmers themselves who are becoming financialised. The author argues that practices of informal subcontracting, mediation and border governance underlie this regime. This results in a marked increase in the precarity of small farmers, shifting to them the natural and human risks of agricultural production in Russia. He also points out that managers of large companies use the border to discipline and dispossess the direct producers.

Despite the increasingly complex forms of subordination of the farmers to capital, they find their own paths in a new precarious world. Moreover, they build new forms of supply chains, where post-Soviet villagers who were left out of work after the collapse of Soviet collective and state farms have also managed to discover their niches. In our collection, Grigorichev and Koreshkova, like Ivanov, use assemblage language (although in its more fundamental – DeLanda 2006 – version). In so doing, they examine how local Russian actors deploy to their advantage the potentially negative trope of ‘Chineseness’; meanwhile, by a reverse process, Chinese capitalists recruit local actors to provide the camouflage of ‘localness’ to remove the stigma of ‘Chineseness’ from their produce, thereby enabling the harvest of a bonus profit reflective of a semblance of local origin. This local case has global relevance, since altering,
using, camouflaging, stealing identities, brands, images for profit is by no means an exclusively Siberian invention. However, the case has post-socialist colours, and these colours allow the authors to unravel how capitalism can use any leftover, any debris for its purpose. The authors vividly demonstrate that it is crucial to look at the material accouterments – be they the ruins of a collective farm or the enamelled basins of ‘babushkas’ touting Chinese goods for local products – as the spin-offs of post-Soviet capitalisms.

Hence, the assemblages we study consist not only of social or economic relations but also of material landscapes. Why do materialities matter? Tsing (2015) proposed the term ‘third nature’ to describe landscapes that remained after the ‘bulldozering’ effect of capitalism. In her writing, we see mangled forests, ravaged lands and people thrown to the sidelines, which together produce new forms of economic life. Landscapes remaining after the Soviet collective farming are hardly less depressing than those described by Tsing: they are ‘unhealthy’, ‘poor’, burdened with ruins, crumbling material objects, land tortured with pesticides, dying social and economic ties, and people without hopes. Despite all these depressing materialities, people live their own lives and build new economic relations. Ryzhova, also using the term ‘(polyphonic) assemblages’ as her descriptive language, shows how a post-socialist economy used to work and how it tapped post-socialist ruins until large capital entered the village. Focus on materiality allows the author to dig deeper into the process of transition per se, which, in contrast to a massive number of publications on post-Soviet rural economies, most often eludes anything that could be called a full transition. Researchers usually grasp specific points along the way through a ‘valley of tears’, but not a continuum. Inanimate material objects, which have a different temporality from human beings in constant motion, show both a certain continuum as well as the process of capitalist bulldozering.

Thus, each of these three articles shows how capital conquers and transforms ruins and how capitalist logic vanquishes socialist ones. In Ivanov’s case, capitalist logic ignores the socialist remnants and fences them off. In Ryzhova’s example, capital seeks to suppress and destroy remnants. And in Grigorichev and Koreshkova’s case, capitalist logic masks itself and makes use of nostalgia for the Soviet. A fourth article, written by Kuklina et al., focuses on how capital seizes not so much socialist ruins (imagined or material) but the natural habitats that have – at least to some extent – escaped from simplification in socialist time. The authors observe the entanglement of multiple diverse economies formed by the global demand for gold, the Chinese desire for jade, the remnants of Soviet planning systems, the new-born forms of Russian State capitalism, traditional Soyot and Buryat land-use practices and nascent flows of both adventure and recreational tourists. The authors attempt to delineate the
primary sources of capital in the Oka Valley, describe their spatial layout and
analyse the intersections between different sources of capital. These bizarre
pictures of diverse capitalisms intermingle, conflict, and above all alter the
natural landscapes that remained relatively inaccessible and untouched dur-
during the Soviet era. Thus, the authors show how it turns out that these diverse
capitalisms are proving to be both more invasive and more pervasive than the
socialism that preceded them.

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