orchestrated, often repressive government, the voice-over could have provided the audience with a more detailed and balanced picture. However, instead, information on Tajikistan’s political and economic set-up, the lingering effects of the country’s devastating civil war from 1992–7 and current conflicts remains oddly absent.

Overall *The New Plastic Road* is a welcome contribution to the small corpus of works on Gorno-Badakhshan. The film provides the viewer with beautiful images of the region and a rich story of Davlat, a locally rooted businessman, and his life on and along the trade route from China to Tajikistan. At the same time, it is appropriate to perceive Davlat’s story as an exception and not to extrapolate from his personal economic success to emerging prosperity in the region. Taking this point further, one could ask if the opening of borders and the construction of transport infrastructure are sufficient to make China trade an endeavour that creates wealth along the way and not just in selected centres.

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*The Road to Kurdistan.* Dir. and prod. Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri. 54 mns.  
Kurdish (Sorani dialect), Farsi with English subs. 2013.

There are very few documentary films on the Kurds which manage to be informative in so many fields as this film by a Kurdish director from Iran, Pershang Sadegh-Vaziri. The sometimes complex events in Kurdish social, political and cultural reality unfold in a very subtle way creating a valuable insight to Kurdish life and culture.

The film can be called a road movie because it tells the story of a small group of Kurds from the so called Rojhilat, the Iranian eastern part of Kurdistan, who travel to Bashur in the Iraqi southern part of Kurdistan. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 the political changes in Iraq brought about the acceptance of the Kurdistan Regional Government within the new state federal system. That is why Bashur has become the main destination for the Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan (i.e. from Turkey, Syria and Iran). The main reason to travel there is to see the ‘free Kurdistan’ that is still a desire of millions of Kurds, as was explicitly declared by Fuad, a musician and traveller at the beginning of the movie.

The director, who is also one of the travellers, is accompanied by her father and aunt, and they seek traces of her old aristocrat family from Sanandaj (Sine in Kurdish, the capital of the previous Ardalan duchy) in Suleymaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan (the capital of the previous Baban duchy). Historically, Ardalan was part of the Persian empire, and Baban was subordinate to the Ottoman empire, but in fact both duchies were very much interlinked by common cultural and regional political bonds. Pershang Sadegh-Vaziri and her father particularly refer to the famous Kurdish poet and historian Masturay Ardalan (1805–47). She married the Kurdish ruler of Sanandaj but after his death she had to move to Suleymaniya, where she spent the
rest of her life. Before the journey Sadegh-Vaziri visits the sculptor Hadi Zia-Odini, whose 4-metre high statue of Masturay decorates the Sami Abdul-Rahman’s park in Hawler (or Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan). So, the ancient cultural links between both regions have been preserved and continue to develop at present.

However, the film mentions many historical obstacles, such as the border closing during the Iran-Iraqi war and reopening only after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Crossing the border legally or illegally became a major preoccupation for many Kurds from Iran trading in gasoline or searching for better employment in Iraqi Kurdistan cities. Filming the travellers and their conversations we learn about the tragic events in the panoramic mountainous landscape on both sides of Iraqi-Iranian border. The chemical attack on Halabja in 1988, the Kurdish uprising of 1991 that was followed by the mass repression and exodus of the Iraqi Kurds to Iran and Turkey, widespread torture and discrimination are all recorded. People talked about them as if they were a part of their normal daily life. The tragic past interweaves with the hopeful future. The Iraqi Kurdistan changes have formed a more stable reality. However, Nasri Razaze, the famous musician and activist who comments on Kurdish history from the very beginning, stresses that the future of the region and of Kurdish policy is still very fragile. Moreover, having had so many hopes and dreams dashed in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq many Kurdish visitors from neighbouring countries remain disenchanted.

The travellers soon begin to observe differences, especially in the social and cultural reality. At first Fuad is excited, seeing the freedom of Kurdish women who do not need to wear charshafs on Suleymaniya’s streets. But then Samra, the young girl who is studying music in Suleymaniya, tells us that the freedom of women is still restricted by old customs and ways. Fuad realizes that in spite of his talent and skills he cannot make a career in Bashur without support from the influential people, and who are not interested in helping him. Persheng and her family cannot find the grave of the great Masturay because people living around the cemetery and the mullah have never heard of her. Bashur had paid a high price for its freedom as the years of fighting and dislocation of people obliterated many areas. At the end of the film, Seyyed Arash Shariari, Fuad’s Teheran teacher, complains about the Middle Eastern domination of politics over culture. He points out that the real artist should not seek fame but the soul that is the essence and source of art.

It is possible that Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri’s film was inspired by the well-known film Halfmoon by Bahman Ghobadi (2006). The motif of the journey to Iraqi Kurdistan, the musician who desires to give a concert in one of the Bashur cities and even the figure of the bus driver, who arranges the difficult journey, resemble Ghobadi’s feature film. However, Sadegh-Vaziri has managed to express her own independent vision of ‘the road to Kurdistan,’ which undoubtedly refers to the evolving process of building the Kurdish nation. Her documentary emphasizes the
role of common culture (especially language, literature, music and film) in producing the ‘imagined community’ and its links between different states, regions and people.

Sadegh-Vaziri’s film and his attention to detail, the particulars and the complexity of perspectives might also be its liability when we take into consideration that much of the information on Kurdish culture presented in the film may be completely unknown to a wider public. Thus, the allusive and subtle way of recounting Kurdish culture might be a little confusing, but it will certainly evoke interest in this beautiful and neglected cultural heritage.

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