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Borders, boundaries, horizons and Quemoy in an asymmetric world†

Brantly Womack*

Department of Politics, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA

The diversity of borderland realities makes the necessity of general conceptualization particularly challenging. An interrelated conceptual triad is proposed and then applied to the experience of Quemoy Island (金門, Kinmen, Jinmen) from 1895 to the present. All borderlands are places in which contact is shaped by a standing and distinctive disparity, and the boundaries that both define and split the area create the rules of border gaming and the larger contingencies influencing border identities.

Whether a village, a region, or a state is treated as a borderland – in other words, the horizons of focus – is determined by the analyst but on the basis of the realities of venue and governance. In Quemoy and most other border situations, asymmetries of power, resources, and capabilities provide an uneven ground for interactions and therefore shape the realities and perceptions of contact.

Keywords: borderlands; Quemoy; boundaries; horizons; asymmetries

Border areas are among the most richly textured human spaces, bringing endless delights to adventurers and endless headaches to regulators. To pursue abstractions about them seems to be contrary to their nature. To ask the question, “what do all borderlands have in common?” appears to squeeze the life and uniqueness out of each one and to leave an uninteresting, leaden residue. It is nevertheless a necessary question. Terminological consistency requires attention to definitions, and, more importantly, a general conceptual model provides a framework for communicating, comparing, and articulating differences among cases and changes over time. The first task here is to try to formulate a conceptual scheme that would be true of all borderlands, anywhere. Not because they are all the same, but because if we call them all “borderlands” we must have some general feature in mind. While this philosophical anatomy of borderlands is pallid and lifeless, it will be applied to Quemoy, a borderland whose variety of experiences stretches the limits of conceptualization. We first lay out the bare bones of the conceptualization, for the sake of clarity, and then Quemoy adds the flesh. Finally we will consider the effects of asymmetry in structuring border interactions.

Border areas, boundaries, and horizons

With a little effort and imagination, every situation can be described as a border to something, or between two things. National borders are the most obvious, but there are frontiers of terrain, urbanization, ethnicity, political intensity, and so forth. Even

*Email: bwomack@virginia.edu
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personalities can have borders. With such a flexibility of application, the question of what is or is not a border becomes meaningless. The better question is what is being claimed when we call something a borderland?

The challenge of defining a border is more complex than it might seem. It would be easy to take the position that, for instance, “a border is a place where two states meet,” and to consider any other usages either incorrect or metaphorical. While that approach would distinguish the category of “border” from everything else, it would not tell us much about why borders are interesting, and why the usage of the term stretches beyond that “proper” categorization. It is rare that a researcher is simply contrasting a border to a non-border. Rather, it is the complexity of border reality that attracts attention. Definitional gate-keeping has its uses, but a more fruitful approach might be to reflect on why people are interested in what they call borders.

I argue that there are three elements or dimensions to the claim that something is a borderland. First, it is a venue of interactions based on differences. It involves a border area in which differences meet. Second, a border implies a distinction between a periphery and one or more centers. A border implies boundaries. Lastly, research about a particular border requires a framing, a horizon of discourse. I label these elements border areas, boundaries, and horizons. Their underlying general claim is that there is a significant and located difference in the borderland that merits attention.

The three elements of border areas, boundaries, and horizons constitute a conceptual model for borders and have utilities beyond mere categorization. To be sure, any sustained discussion of a border should involve or imply all three elements. Like a molecule, the elements can be distinguished, but all three are required for completeness. But the elements are not equally important in all cases and at all times. Rather, they are like the moments of a conceptual triad in Hegel’s dialectic, related to one another and each fulfilling a distinct logical role.1 As we will see in the case of Quemoy, it moved from a rather boundary-less situation of being the stepping-off point for emigration to the South China Sea to being a closed-off hyper-boundary during the Cold War. Research about Quemoy before 1947 fits well into the horizons of coastal China, while afterwards it became part of the Cold War, and more recently a border area between Taiwan and the Mainland. Exploration of the different salience of the elements moves the conceptualization of borders beyond mere categorization. We can move beyond the questions, “are the essential elements present?” “are we talking about a border?” to the more interesting questions, “how do the elements relate and change?” “what makes this border worth our attention and generally significant?”

**Borders areas: venues of interactions presuming difference**

A border area is a venue of interactions that presumes a significant gradient of difference. It is a place of a special kind of contact. For example, any market presumes a difference between buyer and seller, but these are roles that anyone can have and anyone can change. The peculiarity of a border market is that the different situations on either side of the border create a gradient that affects interactions. The gradient of difference, whatever that might consist of at a particular border, creates both the opportunities for contact and the urge felt by officials to govern interactions. Rice can be bought and sold in any market, but if the price of rice is higher in China than in Vietnam, in the border market rice will tend to be a popular item flowing only in one direction. Difference is not always a matter of price. Mainland Chinese come to Hong Kong to buy huge quan-
tities of infant formula because of food safety scandals at home. Many resell the powder to Shenzhen wholesalers when they return across the border.

A border area does not have to lie between two centers. Any periphery with a located gradient of difference could be considered a border area. For example, coastal/inland, agricultural/nomadic. One can consider the interactions between the centers and peripheries of William Skinner’s macroregions of China as border interactions, though this might stretch the notion beyond its usual application (Skinner 1977). Basically, if one place has something that a neighboring place doesn’t, then it is likely that there will be a gradient of interaction based on that difference at the place where they meet – the border area. In the case of a seaward border the “neighboring place” becomes non-specific, and in the case of emigration the gradient of difference pulls people out of the border venue.

A significant gradient of difference is not limited to commodities, and interactions are not limited to the exchange of goods. Border areas between ethnic groups or states are usually characterized by cultural interactions premised on difference. A border is a place where a fairly stable and distinct difference provides the framing tension of the fabric of interaction.

A periphery of central control can be viewed as a border area if there is a significant gradient of difference with the center. If two remote peripheries meet at a frontier then a border area can become an intermediate zone. Instead of a gradient of difference between the interactors themselves, the border frontier can be defined by a difference between the shared periphery and its various centers. An example would be a trans-border ethnic group engaged in smuggling. In contrast to the typical border area the internal interactions would be homogeneous but the interactions with centers would be based on difference. This would be a limit case for a border area because it would not be intersected by boundaries. But the difference between such an area and its surrounding centers would be the reason for treating it as a border area.

**Boundaries: differentiation of identities and interests**

The second element in the conceptual molecule of borders is the idea of boundary. Boundaries are the source and reality of the gradient of difference present in border areas. The second moment in a Hegelian triad is that of definition, of determining the limits of the first, and in most cases boundaries define the border. As James Scott has argued, there is an inevitable tension between mobility and governance (Scott 2009).

The liminality of borders creates an analogous urge for transparency and control on the part of the respective states, hence border checkpoints and visas. But it is not only the states that must define themselves. The borderland actors exist in a fluid and contingent environment that requires a constant recalibration of who they are and what they want. The term “boundaries” is felicitous because it suggests the challenge posed to identities by interactions based on difference. The interesting thing about the role of definition of identities and interests in border areas is that it is not the border area itself that is delimited; rather each interactor, facing the gradient of difference, must stake out his, her, or its identity and interests. Boundaries are posited by the different identities and interests of each side, and they meet in the middle of the border area – they bisect it. The border area is the place where bounded identities meet.

The most obvious boundaries are those marking political control. To some extent these boundaries create the differences that literally define border areas. The train stops here. Passports must be shown. And in most cases boundaries create the barriers that,
by attempting to control contact, create and shape an interactive venue. As the concerns of border governance approach zero, as in the EU’s Schengen system before the 2015 refugee crisis, the border area becomes less meaningful. There is less reason to cross, and fewer people stop or are stopped. By contrast, a frontier border area with diminished central control from any direction can develop its own identity distinct from its transnational situation. The difference between a border area and an interstitial state can sometimes be a matter of interpretation.

If a border is hostile or sealed and cross-border interaction is prohibited, then a border area is literally marginalized. It becomes the edge where one political identity confronts another, alien identity, militarized and impoverished by its loss of opportunities. While a locality in a rear area has a full circle of possible interaction, a sealed border has at best a half circle as well as the security distortions of being at the front line of confrontation. As the boundary becomes an absolute barrier, the border becomes an edge of authority rather than a border area.

In a “normal” border area, one where interaction occurs and is governed by both sides, the difference in governance shapes each side of the venue. If it is very tedious for anyone, including locals, to cross the border, then it will tend to be a rather sterile point of inspection and transshipment. If there is a difference in governance but border formalities are bearable then the border area itself will induce a clientele attracted by the different grass on the other side of the fence. If there is a special permissiveness for local, small-scale interaction, as on China’s mainland borders (Chan 2013), it is likely that a third and more richly textured layer of localized interaction will be part of border life, involved with more formal international exchange but distinctive.

Just as commodities are not the only modality of border interaction, so politics is not the only modality of boundary governance. As groups take advantage of interactions outside their group, they must protect their particular interests and identities. Indeed, the presence of other groups requires additional definition of their own identity, beyond intergenerational socialization and subgroup rivalry. And perceived pressure from other groups requires governance of group boundaries. Contact requires groups to develop their own “foreign policy” and to manage the borders of their own identities. As with political boundary management, societal and cultural governance can run the gamut from self-isolation to uninhibited contact, though there are more options to specify different categories or targets of looser and tighter group concern.

**Horizons: framing border areas**

The third element in the conceptual molecule of borders, horizons, also fits well into the Hegelian triad of moments. The first element, the border venue, expresses the “thereness” of the border area, the location of interactions premised on difference. The second, boundaries, provides the counterposed definitions that delineate the different identities that meet as well as their patterns of interactions. In the third moment of framing, the observer posits that there is a significant locus of interaction based on a gradient of difference. The framing decision is an aesthetic judgment of the perceived coherence of border area reality. Different horizons are possible because the observer can focus on different dimensions of significance. To illustrate, a border area could be a local market on the China-Mongolian border, or adjoining border counties, or even Mongolia itself as a nexus between Russia and China. Framing is subjective in the sense that it is done by the observer, but significance is asserted on the basis of a venue of configured interaction. It is important to note that while it is up to the analyst to pick the framing, it is
not simply a matter of analytic categorization. The claimed horizons must demarcate real contexts of interaction.

**Quemoy (Kinmen, Jinmen, Chinmen, 金門，金門)**

The discussion thus far has been an attempt to construct a conceptual framework sufficiently abstract to be used to discuss any border. It aspires to be more than a “yes it is one/no it isn’t one” categorization of border areas. Thus it is important to illustrate its utility by applying it to a case. However, since the point of the framework is to add an analytical dimension to the texture of border studies rather than to displace the thick description of its reality, I will first sketch the general situation of Quemoy and only afterwards directly address the elements of the framework.

Quemoy (see Figure 1) is a small island with an extraordinarily complex experience of border interactions. It has an area of 150 square kilometers (60 square miles) and a population of 120,000. Although it is part of Fujian Province and separated by only a few kilometers of water from Xiamen City, 160 kilometers across the Strait from Taiwan, it is also part of the Republic of China (ROC). The retreating Guomindang (KMT) army successfully defended it against the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the last battle of the Chinese civil war and has garrisoned it ever since. The de-militarization of the island began in the early 1990s and direct contact with the mainland resumed in 2000.

![Figure 1. Map of Quemoy, Taiwan, and China.](image)
Quemoy’s openings and closings

Quemoy’s intertwining of border interaction and boundary security began in the fourteenth century with the combination of coastal defense and smuggling (Chiang 2011). In 1651 the retreating emperor of the Ming Dynasty, the Prince of Lu (Zhu Yihai 朱以海) took refuge there and died when the Qing conquered the island in 1663. With the opening of emigration in 1860 Quemoy residents scattered throughout Southeast Asia. By the twentieth century Quemoy, like many coastal places in Guangdong and Fujian, became dependent on remittances from overseas relatives and associations both for family welfare and major civic projects. As young people pursued their overseas opportunities Quemoy lost 40 percent of its population between 1915 and 1929 (Chiang 2011, 170). Given Fujian’s history of long-distance trade and the occupation of Taiwan in 1895 by the Japanese, Quemoy’s primary connections were with its mainland neighborhood and with its relatives in Southeast Asia, primarily Singapore and Hong Kong. Quemoy was occupied by the Japanese from 1937 to 1945, but it was neither a venue for development nor a frontline. Quemoy’s experience with the Japanese was not the long-term transformation that Taiwan experienced, but rather like that of the rest of coastal China – brief, harsh, and military.

Previous patterns of interaction came to an abrupt end in 1949. After Quemoy was successfully defended, the ROC maintained it as a military strongpoint. At the height of tensions in the 1950s, a hundred thousand troops, one-third of the ROC’s combat troops, were dug in, dodging a half-million artillery shells in the crisis of 1958. Even Secretary of State John Foster Dulles considered it “rather foolish” to station such a large force at such a distance from support and within artillery range of the mainland (New York Times 1958). As Tang Tsou pointed out in a contemporary analysis, Chiang Kai-shek’s purpose went beyond maintaining a stepping-stone to reconquering the Mainland. He was also trying to create a casus belli between China and the United States (Tsou 1959). As Walter Lippmann put it during the 1958 crisis:

> The device that he [Chiang] is employing to entangle us is to insist...that the blockade of Quemoy can be broken only by bombarding the Mainland. But the snare for the gullible is to pretend that the Formosa air force can silence the shore batteries....What he means is that if we allow his planes to begin the attack, we with our planes would then have to take on what he has begun (Lippmann 1958).”

Quemoy was the brink of Chiang Kai-shek’s brinksmanship, and the question of whether to use nuclear weapons to defend Quemoy was seriously debated in Washington. All over the world, and into the presidential debates between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, Quemoy became a household word. The defense of Quemoy became the litmus test of steadfastness in defending the boundaries of the free world.

Meanwhile the households on Quemoy were simply battlefield extras. They were initially totally cut off from their relatives in Southeast Asia (and their remittances) as well as from the mainland (Chiang 2011). As Michael Szonyi has detailed, they were completely under military control (Szonyi 2008). For thirty years the island had twice as many soldiers as civilians, and one in five families was operating what Szonyi calls a “GI Joe business” – a small shop catering to the soldiers (Szonyi 2008). Not coincidentally, Quemoy’s signature products became army-produced gaoliang (sorghum) liquor and knives made out of artillery casings. While martial law was lifted in Taiwan in 1987, the War Zone Administration remained in charge of Quemoy until 1992.
Six thousand troops remain in Quemoy in 2014, but its situation has transformed in
the new century (Liu and Hsu 2014). For the first time, it is becoming a “normal” bor-
der area rather than an externally-oriented periphery or a sealed and militarized bound-
dary. The first ferry link to Xiamen opened in January 2001 and from December 2004
Fujian residents were allowed to visit under the “mini-three links” policy. Although
PRC visitors diminished when direct air links to Taiwan were opened, Quemoy remains
the cheapest and most convenient point of contact. However, the PRC has developed
Pingtan Island, a competing venue roughly the size of Quemoy located off the coast of
Fuzhou City. The development of Pingtan into a link with Taiwan is a key part of the
PRC’s 2011 “Western Taiwan Strait Economic Zone,” though the development of
Xiamen (across from Quemoy) is also included (Chiu 2014). Meanwhile Taiwan tourists
come to visit, some for army nostalgia, some to buy Mainland goods that have “floated
over.” And almost everyone flying back to Taipei brings a bottle of gaoliang liquor in
their carry-on luggage. I did too.

Quemoy analyzed
We can lure the rich and complex texture of Quemoy back into our abstract Hegelian
triad of border areas, boundaries, and horizons. As a venue of interaction, Quemoy has
moved from an outward-oriented interaction with its own diaspora to a subjected and
intense interaction with the military and – more distantly but directly – with the geo-
politics of the Cold War. Quemoy might be called “all border area, no boundaries”
before 1947, to “all boundary-edge, no border area” during the Cold War. Beyond the
Cold War, Quemoy’s gradient of difference is still dependent on politics. Its PRC and
ROC tourists come for different reasons but the attractions derive from its border status.
It is back to being a normal borderland, an area where differences meet, with boundaries
creating reasons for interaction and also regulating activities.

Few places have had as intense experiences with the boundaries of governance. The
Qing relaxation of emigration created a diaspora that nevertheless kept its Quemoy
identity and connections. Then Battlefield Quemoy completely changed the picture.
Residents were marginalized as suspect onlookers, camp followers, and occasionally as
Berlin-style poster-children of freedom’s heroic confrontation with tyranny. Absolute
boundaries toward the mainland and even restricting relationships with relatives in
Southeast Asia replaced the seaward frontier. With the thawing of ROC-PRC relations
Quemoy transitioned from prominence as the experimental meeting place under the
“mini-three links” to a more ordinary border situation based on the convenience of its
location. Quemoy’s peculiarly ambiguous status remains. It is the non-Taiwanese part of
the Republic of China, and the part of Fujian Province that is not part of the People’s
Republic of China.

Perhaps the most interesting dimension of Quemoy’s border status is that of horizons
of analysis. Szonyi provides the most sustained and empathetic account in English of
life on Quemoy, but as his title, Cold War Island, suggests, it is a life fundamentally
distorted by larger frameworks. One could certainly view pre-1949 Quemoy in the con-
text of other seaward frontier towns in Fujian and Guangdong, and its diaspora was part
of the larger phenomenon of South Sea sojourners (nanyang huaqiao) (Wang 2003).
This was a very different context from Japanese Taiwan during its fifty years of colo-
nialism. Then with the Cold War, the few kilometers between Quemoy and the mainland
became the knife edge of global confrontation, a chasm more profound than the Taiwan
Strait itself, to be defended, possibly, by general war and by nuclear weapons. The nearness of the mainland made Quemoy both the point of greatest threat of attack and the point of opportunity for Chiang’s return. Meanwhile China responded to Quemoy by shelling it as the nearest bastion of its civil war enemy. Quemoy mattered so much to both sides, and to the world, that its people did not matter. The development of democracy and Taiwanese identity had resonances on Quemoy as people pressed for demilitarization, but Quemoy had never been part of Taiwan, and it did not appreciate suggestions by DPP politicians that it could be given back to the PRC (Szonyi 2008). Its new border status between Taiwan and Xiamen for the first time located the venue of international border interaction on the island itself. It became the forward foot of cross-strait contact precisely because it was on the wrong side of the Taiwan Strait. Quemoy lost its experimental status as direct contact developed between Taiwan and the Mainland but it retains its advantages of location and convenience.

Asymmetry and difference

While the first two parts of this essay concentrated on border areas as venues of difference, we now look more closely at difference itself. What is the “gradient of difference” that creates the possibility of a border venue? How do disparities on either side of the gradient affect interests, perceptions, and patterns of interaction? How is boundary governance affected by disparities in political capability? Does asymmetry relate only to national horizons, or can we analyze subnational asymmetries?

Since borderlands relate to centers, their situation is inherently asymmetric. But the typical modern border is both the venue of asymmetric contact with its center and the boundary of its own national identity in its cross-border relationship. The borderland thrives on the gradient of difference. The larger the gradient the better, as long as interaction occurs. Smuggling can be profitable for the border area precisely because it undercuts national policy (Womack 2001). If the border is transparent, then the only border advantage is international convenience. While border activity is an existential activity for its participants, it is a more abstract matter of international policy for national leadership. A border area may be more patriotic because it regularly confronts its other, but it may be less nationalist because it depends on an active bilateral relationship. In any case, however, it is subject to the fluctuations of bilateral politics.

International differences of capabilities

For many if not most borderlands, the most important asymmetry is not the immediate one between itself and its national government, but rather the disparity between the two states that meet at the border. In the case of China’s fourteen neighbors on its land border, all except Russia and India are clearly in asymmetric situations, and even these two have asymmetric aspects. But asymmetric international relationships are certainly not limited to Asia. One could consider the relationship of Mexico to the United States, or that of Guatemala to Mexico. These situations of international asymmetry are not simply matters of concern for national governments. They are particularly important for the places where the two states meet.

If two states have equal capabilities, then each can do to the other what the other can do to it. The basic calculus of the relationship should be reflexivity: the Golden Rule. If a state of roughly equal capability does something that the other does not like,
it can respond in kind. However, if there is a significant disparity of capabilities then the logic of the interaction becomes more complex.

An asymmetry of capabilities exists when one side cannot do to the other what the other can do to it (Womack 2016). Even a voluntary exchange of equal values, such as normal buying and selling at the border, will be proportionally more important to the smaller side. In a mutually beneficial interaction the smaller has more to gain. In an antagonistic interaction the smaller has more to lose. Thus reflexivity is not an option. If the smaller side responds in kind it will not be able to have the same effect, while the larger side has the option of raising the ante by responding with even greater capabilities. While this is most obvious in great questions of war and peace, it also affects the governance of everyday interactions as each state pursues its own interest. The larger side can bully, the smaller can resist and complain.

It might seem to be a tautology that in an asymmetric confrontation the larger side would prevail – that “might makes right.” If David defeated Goliath on a regular basis then the disparity of relevant capacities would have to be recalibrated. However, in most state-to-state relationships, the capacity of the smaller side to evade and to resist should not be underestimated, and determined resistance can prevail in an asymmetric confrontation. Ironically, the mortal threat created by the capability of the larger to dominate gives the smaller the incentive for protracted resistance. By contrast, the larger side feels no mortal threat and has other policy goals that might be more important. Usually the suffering of the smaller is greater than the suffering of the larger. But the larger side can give up, while the identity of the smaller side is bound up with resistance. If identity persists despite defeat, resistance can reemerge even if the government and its army surrender. In a single interaction power will usually prevail, but over the long course of an asymmetric relationship interaction is more likely to be negotiated rather than forced.

If the resistance of the smaller can frustrate the domination of the larger, and both realize that neither can simply force the relationship, then a mature, negotiated asymmetric relationship can emerge. A negotiated asymmetric relationship is not based on equality, but it is based on mutual respect of identities. An agreement to negotiate assumes that the other side has the standing to participate in deciding the issue and that both must voluntarily commit to the outcome. Agreement implies neither unanimity nor even satisfaction with the outcome, but it does imply that remaining differences over the current transaction are less important than maintaining a normal relationship. The border then becomes a place of negotiated but still asymmetric interaction.

Not all asymmetric relationships fit the archetypal model of one state much larger in every respect than a neighboring state. There can be countervailing asymmetries, for example, China’s power based on demography and Japan’s based on technology. A countervailing asymmetry is not symmetry, but it is more complex than simple asymmetry. Moreover, distance between partners modifies asymmetric interactions by thinning the relationship and presenting more options to both sides. Finally, there is the question of calibrating how much disparity is necessary for a relationship to be asymmetric. But for Asia the presence of China creates a large and long set of unquestionably asymmetric relationships.

**The two sides of a normal asymmetric relationship**

Even in a normal asymmetric relationship, the smaller side is more exposed to the relationship than the larger, and the difference in exposure creates a difference of interest, perception, and respective behavioral patterns. The smaller has more to gain or lose in
the relationship, and therefore will be more attentive to it. However, the smaller will be
tempted to interpret the behavior of the larger as if the larger were equally attentive. For
its part, the larger will tend to pay less attention, since it has proportionally less at play.
The smaller is more alert to continuing risks and opportunities, while the larger is more
concerned with moving on to more important matters. Bullying by the larger is the
result both of greater capabilities and the need for closure. Allergic reactions and
paranoia by the smaller reflects its greater risk.

The systemic error of asymmetric relationships may be laid at the feet of the Golden
Rule. The larger views the smaller as a smaller version of itself – itself minus the capa-
bilities – and therefore of little interest unless it allies with powers of greater capabili-
ties. The smaller views the larger as itself magnified – therefore very scary, because it is
just as interested and has the power. In fact, what the smaller needs in the relationship
is exactly what the larger does not need – reassurance that its identity and interests are
respected. What the larger needs is what the smaller cannot imagine for itself – defer-
ence for its larger capabilities and assurance that the smaller is not scheming to reverse
the relationship. In a normal asymmetric relationship, the exchange of deference for
acknowledgment of identity is the key to stability.

If we take the relationship of China and Vietnam as an archetypal example of an
asymmetric relationship, we can see the effects of asymmetry at both the national level
and at the border (Womack 2006). At the national level, the relationship is not simply a
matter of the diplomacy of the two governments, but rather of attitudes shared by the
entire political communities. Vietnamese are more worried about China than the Chinese
are about Vietnam. At the border, Chinese merchants see Vietnam as an extension of
their domestic markets and as inexpensive opportunities for international tourism, while
Vietnamese are more purchasers and hosts to tourism. The differences between
the states create opportunities at the border, and these opportunities are shaped by
asymmetry.

**Quemoy as a prism of asymmetry**

At first glance Quemoy might seem to be proof that might makes right. The Convention
of Beijing of 1860 forced the Qing government to abandon its emigration restrictions,
launching Quemoyans into the South China Sea. The defeat of the KMT on the main-
land threatened Quemoy, but the intervention of the US Navy in 1950 added a heavy
foot to Taiwan’s side of the scale. When that foot was lifted in 1979 the shift in the bal-
ance of power created a Taiwan fearfully cooperative with the Mainland and Quemoy
briefly became the fulcrum of the shift.

But asymmetry is much more complicated than disequilibrium and its shifts. Clearly
the defeat and downfall of the Qing did not quench the identity of China or its desire to
regain its autonomy. Defeat by Western imperialism was real, and its effect on coastal
China was especially profound. In 1895 the link between Fujian and Taiwan was broken
by the Treaty of Shimonoseki, but the broader web of Quemoy’s diaspora to the South
China Sea became more important. However, humiliation also engendered China’s mod-
ern politics, leading ultimately to the civil war that reversed Quemoy’s fate by breaking
its link to the near shore and linking its fate to Taiwan more strongly than ever before.
Quemoy became the symbol of the civil war’s contested conclusion. As the PRC shifted
its policy to peaceful reunification and the Taiwanese found their political voice the sit-
uation of Quemoy became more complex: a border governed by a distant island.
Quemoy is no longer protected by the United States, or for that matter by Taiwan, despite the continuing presence of troops. Its security lies not in military defenses, but rather in the political habituation of both the PRC and ROC to peaceful relations and in the hope that it can prosper as their meeting place (as a matter of the low politics of convenience rather than the high politics of negotiation). Quemoy remains at the intersection of two planes of dynamic asymmetric relationships, the national one between the PRC and the ROC and the subnational one of Taiwan and its most prominent non-Taiwanese part.

Quemoy is certainly out of step with recent political trends in Taiwan. In the January 2016 presidential election the KMT candidate, Eric Chu, received 66 percent of the Quemoy vote, twice the Taiwan percentage, and the DPP winner, Tsai Ing-wen, received 18 percent, one-third of her Taiwan share. It is likely that the combination of Quemoy’s special association with the army and its vital interest in smooth relations with the Mainland were factors in the voting. In any case, it is unlikely that the DPP will feel obliged to pay much attention to Quemoy’s special border relationship.

Quemoy’s asymmetric relationship to the Mainland is less predictable. Cross-Strait tensions are likely to rise during Tsai Ing-wen’s administration, but they are not likely to deteriorate into hostility. After all, it was her DPP predecessor, Chen Shui-bian, who initiated the mini-three links policy in 2001. Perhaps if direct cross-Strait exchange became more constrained, Quemoy could once again become a special venue as a permitted point of contact. Such developments are of course unpredictable, but the rationale of the speculation illustrates the located and asymmetric interests of borderlands.

Notes
1. The terms “thesis, antithesis, synthesis” are often misattributed to Hegel, but in fact he never used the terms, although Fichte, his predecessor at University of Berlin, did. Nevertheless, Hegel’s whole philosophical system is structured in triads of moments which are aggregated into ever larger triads. The first moment expresses the positive essence of an idea, the second expresses its limitations, which can be its practical expressions. The third expresses the underlying harmony of its essence and definition. See G.W.F. Hegel, Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften, 3rd edn., passim.
2. “Larger” and “smaller” should be understood in terms of the relevant disparity of capabilities.

Notes on contributor

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