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Not merely a border: borderland governance, development and transborder relations in Asia

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The anthropology of borderlands

Borderlands are geographical places demarcated and defined by state-designed boundaries. Borderland communities, lying on the margin of more than one state, are thus existing in different development modes and terms of governance. Often, they are (physically) closer to a foreign regime and farther away from the central power of their own governments. People living in the borderlands are acquainted with different regimes of power, and may be skillful users of more than one language and currency for daily interaction and exchange.

Anthropologists have been actively studying borders and borderlands, not only because many borderlands have been neglected in research, but also because they are where anthropologists find concentrated marginalized groups (such as refugees) and minorities, intriguing cross-border state relations and human interactions and mixed and blurred identities. Borderland ethnographies also often provide interesting stories of alternative voices and views of state relations, history, culture, and identity that deviate from what has been defined by the state (Chang \textit{2014}; Chan \textit{2013}; Harris \textit{2013}; van Schendel \textit{2005}). The borderland is indeed a spatial variance of international relations (Chan \textit{2013}, 123).

While borders are themselves defining and delimiting state power and sovereignty, they are at the same time sites that constantly challenge and negotiate such power. Borders and boundaries are often imagined as hard and enclosing frontiers, yet many of them are, in reality, porous (Horstmann and Wadley \textit{2006}; Tagliacozzo \textit{2005}; Walker \textit{1999}; Wilson and Donnan \textit{1999, 1998}). Borderlanders can be active “border-crossers” who make use of such skills to challenge state control and discourses on “boundaries” in order to work on the improvement of life chances and livelihoods. In the unstable war-torn border zone in northern Myanmar, for example, borderlanders are quick to exploit short-term peace and transborder differences. Even in the worst cases of hostile and militarized borders, such as the island of Quemoy in the Taiwan Strait during the Cold War, daily reality is defined by being on the edge of the state and residents are suspect because of their transborder ties (Szonyi \textit{2008}). The anthropology of borderlands

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thus helps maintain and spread voices and perspectives less heard and known of, and produce knowledge and “interstices of culture” that “supplement, challenge and contrast views from the centre” (Chan 2013, 127; also see Thongchai Winichakul 1994).

This special issue intertwines the anthropology of borderlands with the political concepts of governance and development, and employs an actor-oriented approach to examine a few borderlands in Asia. Through this approach, we are able to attend to the variety of different political economic contexts for development and how people – the subject of development – are responding, reacting, circumventing, and resisting such a structural factor as the borderland that has acted on them. The borderland, in this sense, is a specific place/space for us to examine varied forms of governance and development, deviating, to a large extent, from the usual ways that governance and development have been discussed.

**Borderland governance and asymmetries**

We use the concept of “borderland governance” to weave together a number of Asian borderland cases that analyze very different sets and types of data. Although governance has been a catchword in the academic world, especially in public administration and development literature, not many have applied this to the study of borderlands. For those who have, they have mostly attended to state behavior. As Yu Keping argues (Yu 2015), “governance” can be distinguished from “government” in several ways. Government authority is unitary, while governance involves different levels and venues of authority. And although governance implies instrumentality toward given goals, it requires interaction with civil society and local populations for its effectiveness. “Government” is concerned with formal structure and process; “governance” is concerned with interaction and outcomes.

While governance is never transparent, borderland governance is more than national government at its periphery (Brunet-Jailly 2013; Donnan and Haller 2000). A borderland is a place of contact. Its realities on the ground are not simply outcomes of national policies on each side, but instead creatively interact with opportunities and constraints. Borderland communities are often skillful at appropriating and posing canny challenges to state authorities and policies. Whether viewed from the perspective of a single border trader or an entire bi-national region, they are lively, fluid places. They are contingent on their national definitions, but identities of – and within – borderlands shape themselves as they navigate between the opportunities opened by contact and the constraints of their situation (Donnan and Wilson 1994; Wilson and Donnan 1999). Asymmetry is a root feature of borderland governance because of the relationship of periphery to center, as well as that of states. Moreover, (inter)national asymmetries of power, capabilities and resources shape the structure of border contact and governance (Taylor 2008; Womack 2006, 2004). Both the state and individuals are sensitive about and acquainted with such asymmetries and their changes. As stated by Chan (2013, 6), border regions often form “a frontier ‘thermometer’ that detects changing inter-state relations.”

For us, borderland governance serves as a framework broad enough to cover both state and non-state actors. The special issue deals with a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from economic development through different forms of cross-border exchange (such as trade, investment, and marriage) to trans-border human flows (from borderland tourism, to migration, to human trafficking). Border governance inevitably touches on borderland legislation and policies that regulate cross-border activities as well as state relations that shape such policies and activities. We stress that borderland governance
has often involved the acts of different categories of borderlanders. The cases included in the issue handle myriad interactive dynamics between state and non-state, local and global actors, and their intertwined relationships at the border. The articles in this special issue also examine a myriad of border relations and social space constantly created and recreated at the margins and across borders. Borderland studies provide alternative perspectives to the study of the state – understanding the center from the margin – geographically and ideologically (Taylor 2007; Thongchai Winichakul 1994); this special issue’s exploration into borderland governance likewise offers new lenses for understanding governance that involve multiple border-crossing relations and actors.

**An actor-oriented approach**

Borderland governance immediately involves inter-state relations, transborder interactions, compatibility and incompatibility (of social, political, and economic systems), value and ideological differences, power asymmetry, identity shifts, and constant mobility. Despite the many benefits of the traditional institutional approach for examining state relations, we propose an actor-oriented approach that speaks to and about those who act within such state relations and their interactive dynamics. Hence, we do not just look at state level acts – policies, border regulations, and discourses. We employ a dynamic approach to look into how different sectors of actors at the border act and interact with each other (Wilson and Donnan 1999, 1998). While two neighboring countries may work out complementary trade policies regulating cross-border commodity exchange and taxation, borderlanders’ reaction to such policies bring unexpected effects to the original intention of regulation. Indeed, structure and agency often intertwine, affecting each other in varied ways (Brunet-Jailly 2013; Horstmann and Wadley 2006); and borderlanders are those who live their everyday life at the borderland.

Different borderlands exhibit different levels of control and openness (Alvarez 1995; Chavez 1994; Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Ganster et al. 1997; Gilles et al. 2013; Lorey 1999; Martinez 1994; Ross 1978; Smith 1998; Staudt and Spencer 1998). In this issue, we pay attention to the different kinds of borders: restrictive, and relatively more open, as well as borders-in-transition. We discuss the kinds of control and regulation at border regions which neighboring governments put into practice. Whether at restrictive or open borders, we find that borderlanders often actively respond to such restrictions as well as to newly earned liberties of border-crossing. Informal border-crossing is more commonly found than could be imagined from official accounts. Thus, although borders represent the state’s sovereignty and power – an important part of state identity – it is here that violation of state control often appears, and local, contingent identities emerge. Borderlanders are those who are familiar with all the “flexibilities” at inflexible borders. Whether at restrictive or relatively open borders, borderlanders actively respond to such limitation and openness in their idiosyncratic ways (Walker 1999, 17; Donnan and Wilson 1994: 11–12).

**Transborder relations and development**

Borders necessarily breed differences and asymmetries. Besides the asymmetries that states and state relations entail and bear, border differences also assume an asymmetry and dynamics of identity (Brambilla 2007; Chan 2013; Staudt and Spencer 1998; Wilson and Donnan 1998). Wilson and Donnan argue that borderlands are where state-defined power, history and identity are “continuously negotiated and reinterpreted
through the dialectics of everyday life among all people who live at them” (1994, 11). One may assume that at border areas, frequent interaction across borders will bring familiarity of interchangeable identities and mixed ways of living. Yet border areas also witness the worst types of stereotypes and conflicts due to intensified border interactions (Chan 2013; Grillot 2012). The contingency of border realities can lead to rigidities of identity as well as to hybridization, which “define” people and are “used” by the people as well. Border relations are concerned with the shifting discourses of border identities at different levels (individuals, families, specific groups, and the state), and how they affect daily border-crossing, interaction, and livelihood.

Development is a very broad concept and involves all kinds of economic and political policies that would help stabilize a place’s environment and enhance economic growth. However, most often, while policies and rules may provide a general environment to a certain place, and define the status (such as citizenship) of individuals, the actual work of livelihood has often been shaped by different decisions and strategies of individuals and groups that respond to such policies and rules and thus create new political and economic relations between individuals and families, and between individuals and the state and across borders (Chou 2006; Staudt 1998). Borders are margins and boundaries, which can be interpreted as spaces of both dangers and opportunities. It is also at borderlands that governance, inter-state relations, and development become most agile and fragile.

Translocal border space
Border-crossing mobility necessarily incurs a pantheon of space that evokes negotiation and contestation of interests, ideologies, status, and identity. Borders generate new social spaces (which can be real or imagined); borders also split social spaces. A border can be defined as a state’s intervention into overlapping social domains, such as family, business, religion, and livelihood, for the sake of establishing and validating sovereignty. State regulation of border thus involves much discussion of legality and illegality. Yet, the implementation of border control at the same time brings ambiguity about such “legalization” – the institutionalized framework for border-crossing. Borderland families which actively conduct border-crossings and make transborder familial connections and personalized trading relationships, continuously create translocal social spaces, for which “legalization” may or may not cater (Collins 2013; Smith 1998; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). While they are constantly subject to bilateral national control, they are also often making “un-institutionalized” border-crossings – usually understood as informal border-crossing at “informal” border exits. Informality at borderlands is insufficiently appreciated because it must be experienced on-site. It can be misleading to put this immediately into the domain of illegality. Border-crossing (including informal exit and entry, massive refugee exodus, and individual sneaking) is a space where the state is negotiated, contested, and shaped.

Asian borderlands

Reactivated border zones
Asian borderlands offer a peculiar landscape for the understanding of governance and development. This is not only because many of these borderlands have been sites for political struggles and military conflicts; they are also spaces that have witnessed many shifts and shuffles of powers and regimes of regulation (Chapmen et al. 1992; Evans et al. 2000; Gu and Womack 2000; Horstmann 2011; Roper 2000; van Schendel and
Maaker 2014; van Schendel 2005; Walker 1999; Womack 2000, 1994). While some of these borderlands still carry the legacies of colonialism, others were once closed or semi-closed and reopened in recent years (Chan 2013). They are also now and then “under stress” due to contingent political struggles and diplomatic standstill. At times when political divides have been mended, borderlands act as growth regions.

Asia, among other regions, accommodates extremely diverse political and economic systems. Borderlanders in Asia are mostly quick to exploit or capitalize on the newly developed borderland political economies and thereby work on improving their life chances and livelihoods. In short, to tie this temporal dimension back to the concept of asymmetries (of powers and identities), one will be open to the prism of asymmetric relationships at borderlands through multiple overlapping time-space domains and metaphors. All cases in this special issue offer views and sites of reality from the “margins,” which are not merely alternatives from the border, but are taken as “central” and essential to provide a grounded understanding of governance, border-crossing, and development, as well as transborder relations.

**Borderland prototypes**

In this special issue, we bring together six different cases which show the dynamics and diversity of Asian borderlands. Rooted in the diverse political systems and cross-border relations in the region, these Asian borderlands offer a fascinating scene in terms of rapid shifts in state-state relationships, transborder interactions, and borderland development.

The cases included in this special issue manifest a few prototypes of Asian borderlands:

1. Reopened borders and re-activated economic zones (this includes those between China and Vietnam as well as mainland China and Taiwan, both of which earlier suffered from a period of diplomatic standoff and immense political tension);
2. Reintegrated but “separated” border cities (for example, Hong Kong and Macau, which were returned to China in the late 1990s, but were maintained as specially administered border cities of China);
3. Porous borderlands (this includes the territories at the Thai-Burmese and Sino-Burmese borders, which have witnessed frequent informal, if not illegal, migrations);
4. Abstruse borderlands (this is the case at the Sino-North Korean border region: although this border is usually perceived to be highly guarded and impenetrable, there have been border-crossing activities, especially conducted by North Korean women who took to the border to seek alternative survival paths).

**Organization of papers**

Brantly Womack, in this issue’s first article, depicts a fascinating case of a military base-turned-tourist site. With the waning of the “fight back” ideology and discourse in Taiwan, and reduced antagonism between the PRC (People’s Republic of China) and the ROC (Republic of China), Jinmen (Quemoy) – an island lying between mainland China and Taiwan – developed first into an exotic tourist destination for mainland Chinese tourists to expand their imaginations about a “political China” and then subsided into being a convenient excursion as cross-strait relations improved. Jinmen, a Taiwan-controlled borderland a few kilometers from mainland China, shows the full spectrum of borderland
politics, from hostility to normalcy. Womack proposes a general conceptualization of borderlands and argues that there are three dimensions to any borderland: the locality of contact, the regulatory attempt to control and define activities, and the analytic framing of a certain area as a border area. Highlighting the asymmetric normal relationship between China and Taiwan crystallized in the touristic borderland of Quemoy, Womack attempts to unpack the political discourses and realities of civil war, peaceful unification, and development.

Sung Kyung Kim, in the next article, explores the border space at the China-North Korea borderland. Popular understanding of the life of North Koreans centers on their restricted movement controlled by the authoritarian North Korean state and their general suffering, with any border-crossing movements at the risk of their lives. Few have studied in detail the actual practices of border-crossing of the North Koreans who dwell at the borderlands. Contrary to general understandings of North Korean migrants, many North Koreans at the Sino-North Korea borderland cross the border (a border river) as a matter of everyday practice. They do not even bother to settle across the border, but instead enjoy mobility between the two sides of the borderland. This article thus contests the general restrictive stereotypes that frame North Korean mobility, and argues that these border-crossers are calculative agents actively balancing the costs and benefits of migration. A decision of migration often takes into account North Koreans’ spatial perception, intimate human network of relatives, sense of familiarity with language, feelings and emotions for places and people, with little reference to political purges or economic deprivation usually depicted by the media.

Petra Dannecker and Wolfram Schaffar, in the next article, study the space of labor and refugee migration at the Thai-Burmese border region. Unlike most previous literature that focuses on the political and economic struggles of the refugees, their paper discusses how this borderland has turned into a playing field for local, national and international actors striving for different political and economic goals. A long-term haven for active refugees and dissidents, the Thai-Burmese borderlands have become important research sites for examining border politics and particular forms of development and governance under global influences.

Tharaphi Than, in her report, then captures a different kind of development in a border town along the China-Myanmar borderline. With increasing contacts across the border with the Chinese, Mongla, a border town in Myanmar, has been rapidly sinicized. Not only has the Chinese currency become the most common currency in the town, local resources, including land and forests, have been turned into Chinese properties. The town has also thrived through vices – gambling, prostitution, and drugs. Than probes into the new economy of this border town, and reveals the complex triangular relationships between the Chinese, Mongla leaders, and the central government of Myanmar.

Caroline Grillot, in her article, then examines the changing border relations arising from the thriving border trade and businesses between Vietnam and China. Looking deep into the strategies with which Chinese entrepreneurs deal with their Vietnamese business counterparts and Vietnam’s sporadically revised trade policies, she explores trust discourses and practices among Vietnamese and Chinese trade partners and asks how exactly trade partners within different states can learn to trust each other at the borderlands. By looking into the work of money-exchangers at the “Wall Street” in Móng Cái, a Vietnamese border city on the Vietnam-China border, Grillot examines the daily interactive patterns of Chinese and Vietnamese and how both have been actively building “trust capital” for self-interest and for guarding against money traps. The paper has added an important ethnographic case to the literature of trust and business networks.
Yuk Wah Chan discusses the border cities of Hong Kong and Macau. While both have become part of China since the late 1990s, they are both largely self-administered, bearing the status of “special administrative regions” for 50 years. However, prior to becoming completely integrated with China, both cities have “merged” with China in terms of overflows of mainland Chinese visitors. Chan argues that this development of the two border cities has come about as a result of the problematic growth of the transitional political economy of China. Millions of Chinese tourists cross the border to collect daily consumer items from Hong Kong, while many of those crossing the China-Macau border do so to gamble. The article examines how Hong Kong has become a remedy for China’s problematic “fake goods” market, and how Macau has come to the rescue of China’s outflow of renminibi and acted as a space for the deep play of the risk-taking psyche of mainland Chinese.

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