



Fig. 1 (left): Kachin amber in Myitkyina. Virtually all of it is traded into China (Photo by Alessandro Rippa, 2015).

Fig. 2 (below): Kachin timber at the China-Myanmar borderlands (Photo by Alessandro Rippa, 2015).



## Border Studies and the China-Southeast Asia Interface

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For well over a decade, Tallinn University has been spearheading research on Asian borderlands, attracting researchers through various funding initiatives, developing undergraduate and graduate courses, and hosting events on the topic. Most recently, this culminated in the establishment of the Asian Cluster on Bordering in 2021, a study group discussing the newest developments in Asian borderlands.<sup>1</sup> While rooted in Asian Studies, the Cluster on Bordering plans to include researchers from various departments at TLU to bring together scholars who are thinking with and through borders in order to unveil broader social, political, or environmental processes and phenomena, but also aspects of the everyday that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

Such inquiries are rooted in the growing field of border studies, and they germinate from broader inquiries into contemporary cultural, social, and political meaning-making processes at the School of Humanities. With the most prominent scholarship on borders originating from research on historico-political developments in Europe and North America, scholars at Tallinn University, while contributing to the emerging study of Asian borderlands, are further working to bring these two lines of inquiry into dialogue. Asian borderlands are places where an array of active and trend-setting political developments are underway (e.g., China's Belt and Road Initiative and the persistence of non-state spaces), potentially challenging normative understandings of sovereignty and governance.

This research is particularly relevant as national borders and identities, including religious ones, are by no means disappearing anywhere in the world. On the contrary, current developments clearly indicate that rather than fading away, borders have gained further prominence in how nation-states and individuals order, divide, and understand the world we live in. With new plans for border walls frequently generating news headlines, fears of migration "crises" echoing from places as distant as Mexico, the Mediterranean, and Myanmar, and the sword of Damocles of future exit referendums hanging over the EU's head, border studies is emerging as a crucial discipline to critically understand current times.

Within this broader aim to de-centre scholarship on borders and borderlands, Tallinn University has developed particular expertise in the study of the China-Southeast Asia interface, and particularly of the Yunnan-Myanmar borderlands. This effort has largely been led by the work of Dr. Karin Dean, who has worked on the Kachin-Yunnan borderlands for well over a decade. Her work, in particular, focused on contested territorialities in northern Myanmar, and contributes to our understanding of complex issues around ethnicity and armed conflict. Rooted in political geography, Dr. Dean's most recent interest revolves around the impact of Chinese-funded economic development zones on state-making processes in Kachin state's contested borderlands. Recently Dr. Dean joined Dan Smyer Yü to co-edit the book *Yunnan-Burma-Bengal Corridor Geographies: Protean Edging of Habitats and Empires*, a text which offers a wider perspective of the connected spaces stretching from Yunnan, Tibet, and northern Myanmar to northeast India and Bengal.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2020, Dr. John Buchanan, another scholar of Myanmar's ethnic politics, has been based at Tallinn University with support from the Mobilitas Pluss postdoctoral grant. Dr. Buchanan completed a PhD in Political Science at the University of Washington – Seattle in 2017, held postdoctoral positions at Yale University and Harvard University, and is a founding member and the Director of Research for the Institute for Strategy and Policy, a Myanmar-focused think tank. His publications include *Militias in Myanmar* (2016),<sup>3</sup> which provided the first comprehensive study of the country's system of militias. His current research examines the overlap of opium capital accumulation, militarized violence, and state formation in mainland Southeast Asia. His current book project, based on his doctoral research, looks at the history of opium farming in Southeast Asia's highlands. In November 2021, he organized a workshop at Tallinn University focused on the legacy of the US-led war on drugs that examined opium production in Burma's Shan State. The event featured the screening of rare documentary films by Adrian Cowell shot in the opium producing regions of Shan State followed up discussions led by Bertil Lintner.

Dr. Alessandro Rippa, Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at Tallinn University, has also been working at the China-Southeast Asia interface. Based on research carried out mostly on the Chinese side of the Myanmar-Yunnan borderlands, Dr. Rippa has been particularly interested in the nexus of infrastructure development, trade, and securitization. His most recent book, *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development and Control in Western China*, shows how large-scale investment in transnational infrastructure led to small-scale traders losing their historic strategic advantages.<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, the volume shows how local ethnic minorities have become the target of radical resettlement projects, securitization, and tourism initiatives, and have in many cases grown increasingly dependent on state subsidies. At the juncture of anthropological explorations of the state, border studies, and research on transnational trade and infrastructure development, *Borderland Infrastructures* thus aims to provide new analytical tools to understand how state power is experienced, mediated, and enacted in Xinjiang and Yunnan. Additionally, Alessandro Rippa is also one of the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands*,<sup>5</sup> to which Dr. Karin Dean also contributed a chapter and curated a section.

This interest in Asian borderlands is reflected in both teaching and mentoring at Tallinn University's School of Humanities. Several courses at both the BA and MA level include sections on Asian borderlands and transnational dynamics within the region. At the same time, Dr. Dean and Dr. Rippa are actively seeking opportunities to involve more early career scholars through Estonian and EU-wide funding initiatives.

This approach, centered around borderlands, thus contributes to our programme's understanding of Asia as a region of study. First of all, it brings to the fore the constructed nature of scholarly areas and highlights the need to address transregional and transnational dynamics in the study of the region. In doing so, a borderlands approach helps us de-construct simplistic assumptions and views that are still common in mainstream representations of Asian communities and cultures. In our work at the China-Southeast Asia interface, we show that even the most

seemingly remote areas are part and parcel of global patterns and dynamics: from land dispossession to the global circulation of capital. Dr. Buchanan's research, for instance, shows how analyses of opium production and circulations need to move beyond its exceptional status as a valuable, illicit narcotic drug, and focus instead on opium as an agricultural commodity, subject to market forces of supply and demand as well as state regulation and agro-ecological conditions. This, in turn, can add nuance to our broader understanding of nation-building and ethnic separatism in northern Myanmar, further showing the importance of non-state spaces in the study of state-building processes and mechanisms. Lastly, Asian borderlands are a privileged place from which to observe the growing impact of China's economy across the world and how this materialises through particular infrastructure projects. "Global China," as this process is increasingly referred to, requires us to re-think both area studies and the ways in which global processes are approached and understood. A view from the borderlands might achieve just that.

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### Notes

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