Friction and Collaboration in Asian Borderlands

Borders, borderlands, and frontiers are not new concepts. They each carry different meanings in different disciplinary contexts. While borders are most closely tied to conceptions of state sovereignty, they are also exceptionally salient devices across and within which resources, commodities, and people move, and in so moving, define, reinforce, or contest claims to national sovereignty and territory. Scholars have moved from a study of the hard territorial line separating states within the global system to the processes of bordering through which people, commodities, and territories are managed differently, and the processes of change within which are labelled “borderlands.”

For anthropologists, the primary interest lies in studying the daily practices of ordinary people in the borderlands. Instead of a clearly demarcated concrete physical space (near a border), borderlands also symbolize a cultural and geographical periphery.

In a world of presumably clear and established borders, a dive into the everyday experiences of ethnic communities living on both sides of borders, partitioned and divided along lines of nationality, offers a useful reminder of the cultural complexity of people beyond borders and the reinvented entities of nation-states. Beginning from the viewpoint of the communities residing in borderlands along the southwest of China – neighboring Pakistan, India, and Myanmar - Hasan Karrar, Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, and Sun Rui contribute to our understanding of borderland lives in Asia.

China’s Western Borders since the Reform Era

Hasan H. Karrar

When Lattimore famously coined “pivot of Asia” to describe Xinjiang’s position amidst new geopolitical configurations resulting from the onset of the Cold War, decolonization in South Asia, and consolidation of power by the Chinese Communist Party. Seven decades later, Xinjiang remains critical both for how Beijing projects its economic and political influence abroad – China has eight land borders in Xinjiang – as well as for the country’s self-projection as a harmonious multistate. Situating myself variously in north Pakistan and Central Asia, regions adjacent to Xinjiang, I describe how, since the reform era got underway in the 1980s, bordering China has been contorted by frontier capitalism, geopolitics, and recently, securitization.

October 2020, Afiyatabad commercial centre, northern Pakistan. “Our livelihoods are tied to the border,” was the matter-of-fact reply when I commented that the bazaar was quiet (Fig. 1). I had been glancing out from a roadside restaurant. Seventy-five kilometers up the road was Pakistan’s land border with the China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; throughout 2020, the border had remained closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The last time I was in Afiyatabad, in 2017, container trucks with Xinjiang licence plates had been rolling past on their way to the nearby dry port. Although independent cross-border trade between Pakistan and China had been declining, heavy cargo had increased. Visiting Zharkent on the China-
China Connections: Friction and Collaboration in Asian Borderlands

Mirzas Zulfiquar Rahman

New geopolitics

In 1991, five new states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – appeared along (or just beyond) Xinjiang’s borders. New geopolitics, which included settling the disputed borders and acquiring energy security, initially framed Chinese policy towards Central Asia. While cross-border trade by independent traders in fact increased in the 1990s, it was eclipsed by wider strategic concerns, as China and newly-independent Central Asia built regional diplomacy.

In the unipolar world of the 1990s, China led the way in assembling a confidence-building multilateral mechanism between itself, Russia, and Central Asia. In 2001, this mechanism was institutionalized as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that was described as a model for a broad multilateral cooperation, which allowed China to extend assistance to the Central Asian states, including in the commercial realm. The new reality was also when China started “going out,” that is, Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private businesses were encouraged to invest abroad. Xinjiang became a bridgehead for investment in Central Asia and Pakistan. Some were large-scale investments requiring extensive injections of capital, such as the 2006 partnership between China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Kazakh Katolik Oil Company (d. 114 BCE) and Ming admiral Zheng He (1371–1433/1435), along with images of camels, caravans, and China along the Silk Road.

Such engagements came to be seen as the realization of a “New Silk Road,” a term that was popularized following Premier Li Peng’s visit to Central Asia in 1994. In the quarter-century since, the Silk Road narrative has become curtailed. Today, historic figures such as Han dynasty envoy Zhang Qian (d. 114 BCE), Ming Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433/1435), along with images of camels, caravans, and China along the Silk Road.

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The Mishmi community along the Sino-Indian borderlands are commonplace in Central Asia (Photo courtesy of the author, 2017).

Securitized borderlands

The large-scale interment of Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang has mostly remained out of public conversation in Pakistan, as a result of how Pakistan’s civilian and military leadership has deliberately steered clear of the topic. But for small traders who cross through China overland, heightened vigilance, security checkpoints, and humilitating body searches at the border are commonplace in Pakistan, a result of the “New Silk Road.”

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Along the Sino-Indian borderland, there are several interesting tri-junctions, which underline the mountainous character and complexities of the borderlines at the community level. Such tri-junctions involve Nepal and Bhutan in many different sectors, and they are nodes of traditional migration and trading routes across the difficult terrain of these mountainous regions. These tri-junctions have also been sites of territorial claims, contestations, and conflicts, as we have recently witnessed in the Doklam plateau, involving the three countries of Bhutan, China, and India.

The community imaginations, perceptions, and worldviews along these borderlands are based on memories of migration, trade, and pilgrimage routes; regular activities such as hunting in the forests, sources of daily livelihood such as transboundary rivers, wetlands and transborder community linkages. They are broader than that of the nation-state’s border pillars. Some of these borderlines marked by mere border pillars. The practice of marking borders on the ground, which border pillars and cartographic lines and claims are made, has followed natural geographical features such as mountains, hills, lakes, rivers, forests, plateaux, grasslands, and watersheds in the Himalayas. The “water-parting principle,” wherein the edge of a watershed was established to mark the border, was a key marker of international boundary-making around the world in the 20th century, especially in mountainous areas and where dominant cartographical understanding was in terms of border points rather than boundaries. The historical perception of border points in a mountainous area – such as border points across the length and breadth of the Himalayas – was juxtaposed with the “water-parting principle” as an imposed colonial marker to draw regional boundaries. We can therefore see that the Sino-Indian borderlands have several divergent margins.

I spoke with complained of long waits and humiliating body searches at the border. They have also complained that they are not allowed mobility within Xinjiang, and in terms of where they can stay once they are there. Similarly, cross-border mobilities between China and Central Asia have changed. Although Chinese authorities had long been cautious and prudent about the goods, such as textiles fomented by Uighurs and Kazakhs, until a few years back, Uighur and Kazakh small traders were encouraged to travel back and forth between Xinjiang and Central Asia. In my fieldwork in bazaars in southern Xinjiang and in Kazakhstan in 2017, I met Uighur traders who were importing garments and shoes from Xinjiang; this was a cross-border trade between China and Central Asia. Today, there is a stronger push for local industries and ideas of community and social well-being.

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A few days after I arrived in Ruili, a border city in southeastern China’s Yunnan province — Ah Hpaung, a Kachin friend I met earlier from the Sunday worship of Pa Se Christian Church, invited me to lunch. I was amazed by how she sophisticatedly processed the polite sociability by the vendor in fluent Burmese. After lunch, Ah Hpaung took me on a city tour of Ruili, where Bun Puang Road — Fip Fip Road — Long Lang were a common sight. There were also roadside billboards that advertised tutoring in Burmese or solicited Burmese translators. I grew up in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, one of the most ethnically diverse provinces in a foreign country. While there are 25 officially recognized minority groups in Yunnan among the total of 56 in China, the inhabitants of Kunming are predominately Han-Chinese. Arriving in Ruili filled me with a sense of the unknown: for once I was a “guest” in my province. This acute sense of unfamiliarity in a neighboring town led me to be interested in Ruili as a research site, where several ethnic communities — Han, Dai, Jingpo, and Kachin — currently reside.

Much of my fieldwork took place at Pa Se Christian Church, frequented by many Kachin people in Ruili. Historically, Kachin people have been inhabiting Northeast Myanmar, particularly Kachin State and Shan State, bordering Yunnan. In the 1870s, missionaries established their first stations in Bhamo in Kachin State, and since then, Kachin people have gradually converted to Christianity and are primarily Christians by birth. While there is no census data on the percentage of Christians in community festivals and family gatherings, accompanied by Kachin food, and were exclusive to the Kachin community. Such exclusivity initially developed from language barriers between Kachin dialects and Han Chinese, and it was further enhanced through ritualistic differentiation.

Only a few members of the Kachin community felt the necessity to learn Chinese and integrate into the local communities. For most of them, Ruili was the place for “working” and not for “living.” I knew a couple – living in Ruili for almost 20 years, working in the tailoring business – that spoke close to no Chinese. Their customers were also mainly from the church’s Kachin community. For them, the Chinese language was only helpful when bargaining at the wet market, for only a few pronouns were necessary. I was once told by a Kachin who said to me during an interview, “We are going back to Bhamo when we retire. Here is not home.” In Ruili, more than 80% of the Kachin people make a living by trading raw jade stones. There are many uncertainties embedded in such a business. Kachin jade traders sought their customers through church networks to reduce business risk and avoid fraud. Thus, the church further bound the Kachin community and limited cross-ethnic interactions.

Kachin people in Myanmar, Jingpo people in China, and Jingpo people in India share the same ethnic origin and a similar landscape. During the 1960s, a border demarcating China and Myanmar was established through diplomatic negotiations between the two countries. The Jingpo-Kachin people were separated into two distinct regions.

Borderline communities effectively took across the borderline, being consistent with the area in both sides of the border. Therefore, human relations help create, maintain, undermine, and even evolve borders. They also challenge the idea of a national homeland that is sovereign and isolated, and determined and controlled by the nation-state. The lived social realities and community identities in Arunachal Pradesh could be effectively studied by social and ecological framings and viewpoints, which are in stark contrast with the ethnic minorities' perceptions and worldviews offered by the nation-states. The borderland communities across the Eastern Himalayas negotiate multiple identities to imagine geographies straddling nation-state borders. In so doing, they foreground the sense of belonging based on transboundary ecologies.

Infrastructuring shared borderland ecologies

The securitized calculations of China and India have brought both countries to gather their strategic footprint along the borderlines in order to safeguard the natural features that mark these borderlands (e.g., forests, mountains, and rivers) cannot by themselves be considered as sovereign national territory; rather, they have to be infrastructured in certain ways in order to be able to serve as effective sovereignty markers. The process of securitizing and infrastructuring these borderlands has brought roads, railways, hydropower dams, oil and natural gas drilling projects, and mining activities to both sides of the border. Several dams have been constructed and commissioned by China, and many are in the pipeline in India. In Ruili, along the transboundary river Ruili, both China and India have put the shared borderland ecology of the Himalayas and its communities under threat.

The hydropower development plans by India on the Tawang Chu and the Nijung Chu are a case in point. These have faced continuing protests by the Monpa community, who straddle the transboundary spaces around these two rivers both in India and China. The dams threaten sacred sites revered by transboundary communities in the region. This also threatens the sacred black-necked crane, considered to be the reincarnation of the Sixth Dalai Lama, who was born in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. The frictions we witness in the Sino-Indian borderlands operate at multiple levels. Dominating among them is the friction between the nation-states in a securitized framing.

The friction is evident between, on the one hand, infrastructuring borderlands to achieve state presence, order, and control, and, on the other hand, how these identities are being reinforced and transformed by infrastructuring shared borderland ecologies across the transboundary Himalayas.

Notes

1. Longyi is a long apron wearing like a long skirt which is popular among both women and men in Southeast Asia.