Asian Borderlands: Introducing their Permeability, Strategic Uses and Meanings

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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Willem van Schendel* and Erik de Maaker

There is a new interest in the study of Asia's borderlands, based on a sense that state-centered views hamper our understanding of social dynamics in broader regional fields. Of course, most studies of society, culture and history in Asia still accept national territories as the natural building blocks of academic enquiry, perpetuating notions such as Indian society, the Chinese economy, or Indonesian culture. They imply that borders between states are not only of a political and administrative nature, but that they also create separate social, economic and cultural realms. To counter such methodological nationalism, scholarship on Asia is moving in new directions, and the emerging interest in borderland perspectives is one of the results. Compared to other continents, borderland studies were relatively slow to develop in Asia, even though they are of particular importance in the exceptionally multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic social landscapes that characterize much of Asia.

Many of Asia's borders owe their existence to colonial state making and the violent histories that this involved. Even the borders of states that were never formally colonized, such as China, Thailand and Nepal, were the outcome of interaction with colonial border making. Decolonization often was a hasty retreat under pressure of civil conflict or war. It left Asia with many borders that are disputed. The disputes are not only territorial ones between states. Most Asian borders divide people who share languages and ethnic identities and who have been longstanding partners in realms as diverse as trade, agriculture, religious practice and marriage. Consequently, when confronted with borders in their everyday lives, Asians often experience them as arbitrary.

Until the second half of the 20th century, many Asian borders were not demarcated, allowing borderlanders to cross with ease, especially in mountains, rainforests, deserts and marshlands. Even today demarcation is far from complete and the exact location of these borders remains undecided, leading to violent confrontations, for example between India and Bangladesh. Such conflicts are not restricted to land borders but involve maritime ones as well. The latter have gained relevance with the discovery of valuable resources in maritime environments. The ownership of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea is contested between the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, China and Taiwan. Japan claims islands that Russia, South Korea and China also consider their own. And the recent discovery of enormous reserves of natural gas in the Bay of Bengal has prompted India, Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar to renew old claims on swathes of the sea.

In Asia, as elsewhere in the world, state borders are gaining in importance. Unprecedented economic growth in large parts of Asia, for example, India and China, has contributed to a strengthening of these national states and this often translates into attempts to buttress national borders. Today, Asian borders are more militarized than before, extreme cases being the standoff between North and South Korea and the confrontation between Pakistan and India in Kashmir. This hardening of borders requires increased

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demarcation and monitoring of cross-border mobility of people and goods. The easing of border controls that is occurring in some parts of the world is not notable in most of Asia.

We present this “dossier” on Asian borderlands to the readers of the Journal of Borderlands Studies as a special issue to introduce emerging scholarship on Asian borderlands. This special issue encompasses six papers that were presented at the Second Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network (ABRN), held in Chiang Mai (Thailand) in November 2010. So far, the new research on Asian borders tends to be somewhat self-referential and rather isolated from borderland studies elsewhere in the world. There is great scope for further incorporation and theorizing. Recently, two edited volumes have been published that make important contributions to the field of border studies: Wastl-Walter’s (2012) Research Companion to Border Studies and Wilson and Donnan’s (2012) Companion to Border Studies. The large number of case studies included in these volumes bear evidence to the recent proliferation of border studies among a variety of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The Research Companion to Border Studies is primarily rooted in social geography, political science and international relations, as is manifest in its concern with borders as geopolitical boundaries. In this respect it links up with Gavrilis (2008), who focuses on the security challenges that borders pose to states. The essays included in the Companion to Border Studies cater to a greater variety of disciplinary angles. Among these is anthropology, whose ethnographic method contributes perspectives that were not prominent until recently.

Ethnographic studies of borders and borderlands are needed, Dean (2012) argues, since this is the only way to research borderlands as “lived spaces challenged and inspired” by international boundaries. Unfortunately, ethnographic studies of borders have so far been scarce. This is remarkable, since an influential essay by Gupta and Ferguson (1992) pointed out that anthropologists should become much more critical in their engagement with political borders, and not take these for granted. We would like to add that a critical historical engagement is also required to study the long-term impact that borders have on people’s lives. Therefore, this dossier presents contributions that are all based on a combination of historical and ethnographic data.

When border studies re-emerged in the 1980s, it was initially with a strong focus on the US-Mexican border. The extensive research conducted on this border has resulted in it providing a template for border studies in whichever part of the world border research is being carried out (Wilson and Donnan 2012). In the 1990s, Europe emerged as an additional field. Borders internal to the European Union lost much of their earlier significance, but the opposite was true for the outer borders of the union. Moreover, the end of the cold war resulted in a multiplication of borders in Eastern Europe. So far, North America and Europe continue to be central in border studies (Gavrilis 2008; Wilson and Donnan 2012), even though borders elsewhere in the world are also gaining importance, and need to be researched.

Border studies are gradually expanding from their initial focus on the descriptive analysis of the location of the lines separating states in the international system to “the study of the dynamics of the bordering process as it impacts society and space” (Newman 2012). Borders are manmade and continually produced by a variety of state actors, such as legislators, politicians and border guards, as well as by the people who legally or illegally cross them. Borders are not simply there; they are “enacted.” Therefore, Van Houtum (2011) argues, the term should be considered “a verb.” Borders are the result of “the interpretation and consequential (violent) power practices of those who construct and help to reproduce the border” (Van Houtum 2011). The various manifestations of borders need to be researched in relation to the relevant actors. Border studies have shown that “social relations, defined in part by the state, transcend the territorial limits of the state and, in so doing, transform the structure of the state at home and its relations to its neighbours” (Wilson and Donnan 2012).

The worldwide proliferation of borders results from the widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of the nation state. Paasi (2012) locates this tendency in an ever-increasing number of ethnic groups who are struggling to establish a state of their own. The legitimacy of such projects rests with romantic 19th century
European ideas about the unity of state and nation. A state is supposed to unite a group of people with an imagined single culture, language and history—a nation—in a specific and exclusive territorial and political domain. This idea inspired the 19th century unification of European states such as Germany and Italy and played a dominant role in the political reorganization of Europe after World War I (MacMillan 2001). The Versailles Treaty of 1919 created a large number of new states, notably on the Balkans, based on claims advanced by ethno-nationalist movements. But these new states, and the borders that enveloped them, also resulted in the creation of vulnerable ethnic and linguistic minorities that were excluded from the nations thus defined, and the borders were disputed from the outset. In addition, the treaty also reorganized the boundaries of some colonized territories outside Europe: the Middle East and parts of Africa. Neglecting nationalist claims advanced by representatives of these regions, boundaries were drawn that did not take local ethnicities or nations into account at all. Many of these borders are still in existence. Like Asian borders, many continue to be regarded as highly arbitrary, posing challenges to the nations thus defined and casting doubt on their legitimacy. The making of borders cannot be separated from attempts to define nations.

In Europe and North America, states are so firmly established that hardly any territory escapes their control. If control lapses, as with urban slums ruled by criminal gangs that become no-go areas for the police, this is perceived as an aberration, not a serious challenge to the legitimate claims of the state concerned. Globally and historically, political power has not necessarily been linked to permanent control over a clearly delineated territory. In mainland Southeast Asia the territorial power of a state mattered more than its borders. This is a theme central to an important book by Scott 2009. In this book, Scott argues that upland Southeast Asia has until the early 20th century remained outside the control of states, and he analyses the mechanisms that produced this remarkable state of exclusion. James Scott was the keynote speaker at the 2010 Asian Borderlands Research Network conference and participants were asked to reflect on the theme of his book.

Scott’s “upland Southeast Asia” comprises the mountainous regions of the eastern Himalayas and lower ranges that run from the Central Highlands in Vietnam, most of Laos, Northern Thailand, Southwest China, Northern Burma, Northeast India, Eastern Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet. The 200 million people living in this huge region (over 15 million km2) are geographically dispersed and culturally diverse, yet historically they share crucial cultural, economic and social characteristics: physical mobility, hill agriculture, relatively egalitarian social structures, and commonalities in material culture and worldview. In these respects they distinguish themselves from the lowland populations who dominate the states in which they live. National borders often appear utterly arbitrary to them as many groups spill across two or more national borders. Scott argues that historically the people in this area have made consistent attempts to evade the states that tried to lay claim to them and to the territories in which they lived. People did not want to submit to the laws of a state that was not their own and wanted them to pay revenue, or surrender conscripts for the army. Important among the various mechanisms that these people developed, says Scott, was withdrawal into “non-state spaces.” Often, such spaces were outside the control of the states concerned because they were located in rugged terrain: mountain ranges or densely forested areas beyond the control of regular state armies. Scott’s analysis is provocative in more than one respect. Not only does it presume that the people of mainland Southeast Asia’s uplands decided to remain outside the control of a state, he also argues that people living within the confines of a state made a conscious decision to migrate to a non-state space located beyond that state’s influence.

Scott’s argument is based on historical sources, and he does not claim that it applies to the situation after the Second World War. From that time onwards, states in mainland Southeast Asia have gained access to the technology required to gain control over formerly inaccessible terrain, which has allowed them to build mountain roads, lay railway lines, and create extensive communication networks. This way, states could overcome the “friction of terrain,” which previously kept them from gaining access. Even if non-state spaces have lost their early pre-eminence, as Scott suggests, can we still find traces of state evasion, or practices that otherwise bear evidence of groups strategically distancing themselves from the state? Is there
a continuing viability to a concept such as non-state spaces, and how does it relate to borderlands? The six papers presented in this special issue focus on people who practice forms of state evasion by actively engaging with an international border. If they can cross a border at strategic moments, the border can offer them protection from one state while taking refuge under another. An international border can translate into other strategic advantages as well. The six contributions explore these from three different angles: the permeability of borders, strategizing in relation to borders and borderland discourses.

The Permeability of Borders

Borders have the capacity to block flows of people, ideas and goods but do so only selectively. All borders are permeable in various ways but some borders are easier to beef up than others: it is simpler to build a fence in a desert than across a glacier or the sea. Permeability can be the outcome of an agreement between authorities, as it can be in their interest to keep borders open and flexible to allow for cross-border mobility of certain goods and people (Gavrilis 2008). But which authorities? Border guards and others who are locally in charge of a border do not necessarily fall in line with central state policies. Their interpretations may vary, their interests may diverge, or the policy may be simply impracticable. Which flows pass a certain border, and under what conditions, cannot be deduced from policy documents but needs to be teased out by careful local research. Which flows are blocked, and to what effect? How and why does permeability change over time?

The papers in this collection look at these issues in considerable detail. Michael Eilenberg portrays the relatively open border between the British and Dutch colonial states in Borneo. Here border making was prompted by suspicion between states and had little to do with patterns of trade and warfare among the local Iban population. Despite the establishment of border garrisons, movement of people across the border remained easy throughout the colonial period, a situation much appreciated by the people living in the borderland.

Soe Lin Aung and Alexander Horstmann discuss the relative openness of the Thailand-Burma border. Both show the need for a historical understanding of border permeability despite increased policing today —particular corridors of border crossing have been well established since pre-colonial times and, even though local people find it increasingly difficult to cross legally, the Thailand-Burma border continues to be relatively open to illegal passage.

This combination of severely restricted legal border crossings and relatively easy illegal ones is also highlighted in Ellen Bal and Timour Claquin who explore the permeability of the India-Bangladesh border as it impacts on interaction and differential identity formation among the Garo, a cross-border community.

Duncan McDuie-Ra draws our attention to India’s radical attempt to make its 4,000 km border with Bangladesh impenetrable: it is constructing a fence, ostensibly to keep out labor migrants and militants. As McDuie-Ra shows, however, actors at different levels in the Indian state hold conflicting views on the need to curb border permeability.

Strategizing in Relation to Borders

The second theme running through this collection of papers is how states and borderlanders make use of international borders. In border studies, ample attention has been given to the strategic use to which states put borders (Blanchard 2005; Gavrilis 2008). But whereas states create borders and exploit them to their own advantage, borders can also act against states (Wilson and Donnan 2012). How do people perceive the opportunities and dangers that borders create and how do they strategize to advance their own social, economic and political interests in opposition to state interests?
Eilenberg shows how borderlanders used the blocking capacity of borders in colonial Borneo to seek refuge from state agents after having committed “crimes” on one side: the border ensured that the police force whose laws they had violated could not follow them to the other side of the border.

In addition to such movements across a border, there are other forms of strategizing. McDuie-Ra’s paper highlights the political strategies that ethno-nationalist groups employ to gain mileage out of the border fence that India is constructing along the northern border with Bangladesh. They oppose it by arguing that the central state is building the fence on land rightfully belonging to border communities.

Strategizing in relation to borders can also be spatial. Horstmann argues that Burmese Karen refugees in Thailand make use of the presence of international humanitarian NGOs to create a space around major refugee camps that counters the Thai state’s severe restrictions on refugee movements. Aung sees this capacity to create such a space as a result of “marronage.” For him, this is a new dimension of Scott’s “state evading practices.” Burmese refugees reside in a border zone in which Thai state presence is severe, yet manage to develop strategies that allow them to evade the state whenever necessary.

Cultural strategizing is yet another aspect. Debojyoti Das’s paper looks at the effects of colonial border-making in the Naga Hills of northeastern India. Naga people living beyond British administration—border regions near northern Burma that remained “white” on the colonial maps—became labeled as “primitive” and “traditional.” In later decades, Naga ethno-nationalists glorified these “unspoiled” Nagas and used their ascribed “traditionalism” to demand development funds from India’s central government. Bal and Claquin describe very different cultural strategies in their paper on the Garos who, since 1947, have been divided by the border between India and Bangladesh. In making claims to two different states, Garos have emphasized their cultural separateness from Garos across the border but also signaled that their loyalty to each state should not be taken for granted. By contrast, Horstmann’s paper on Karen refugees in Thailand presents cultural unification as a borderland strategy. These refugees are producing the idea of a unified Christian Karen nation in an attempt to supersede the divisions and contradictions that exist among Karen people in Burma.

Borderland Discourses

The third theme in this collection of papers is the local meaning of borders. In borderland societies the international border is discussed variously (and sometimes simultaneously) as a space of neglect, constraint, fear, opportunity and freedom. This holds for borderlanders, but it also holds for the states due to whose boundary making borderlands come into being. Have such discourses shifted over time and, if so, how do they relate to changes in permeability and strategizing?

Eilenberg and Das show that it is difficult to reconstruct borderland discourses historically. Colonial archival sources highlight state perspectives but pay scant attention to borderlanders’ views, except during moments of open confrontation. In the Borneo borderlands local people resisted state encroachment partly through local power arrangements but in the historical record their voices remain weak and fragmented. Similarly, Das shows, we have considerable information on colonial administrators’ border discourses on the Naga hills but Naga views of border-making emerge much later.

Contemporary borderland discourses are easier to access, as Aung argues for migration in the Thailand–Burma borderland. Picking up on James Scott’s notion of the “friction of terrain,” Aung introduces the term “migrant counter-topographies”: ways of reading the borderland that allow migrants and refugees to hide temporarily from the state. Horstmann draws attention to the possibility of parallel, potentially competing discourses developing on either side of a border—in his case a unified Karen identity on the Thai side and a fragmented one on the Burmese side.

Borderlands are often subject to moral discourses, in which “rights” and “legality” are disputed. Such discourses are “moral” because they involve choices that people make regarding what they consider right.
and wrong. McDuie-Ra’s analysis shows that such discourses can be internally conflicting. The ethno-nationalist groups that he studied are in favor of the Indian border fence because they consider migration from Bangladesh illegal, and a severe threat. And yet, they have opposed the fence because it is a project of the central state, which they decry for overriding the land rights of borderland communities.

What do the papers in this special section contribute to our understanding of non-state spaces? Only the unadministered Naga areas discussed by Das and the Borneo highlands discussed by Eilenberg, fit Scott’s qualification of “non-state spaces” as unadministered areas, “white” on official maps. “Non-state spaces” such as these ceased to exist in the early 20th century, as states secured their presence in the borderlands. A modern form of state evasion is discussed by Aung, who shows how the counter-topographies created by Burmese migrants residing in the Thai borderland aim at a withdrawal from state-controlled space, even if just temporarily. But whereas “non-state spaces” may have become relatively rare, contemporary borderlanders have evolved alternative state-evading practices, as the papers included in this collection demonstrate.

We hope that this dossier on Asian borderlands will encourage further comparisons, both across Asia and, crucially, with borderlands throughout the world. Such comparisons are essential to develop a truly global field of borderland studies and they hold the promise of exciting conceptual and methodological innovation.

Endnotes

1 For more information on ABRN and its biennial conferences, see http://www.asianborderlands.net. The Chiang Mai conference, entitled ‘Asian Borderlands: Enclosure, Interaction and Transformation,’ was hosted by two research centres of Chiang Mai University, the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) and the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD). For the conference, the ABRN closely cooperated with the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the NGO Cordaid, both based in The Netherlands.

2 Scott refers to this contiguous upland region as “Zomia,” a term employed by Willem van Schendel (2002) in a critique of the limitations of area studies.

References


