

Reframing China Studies:

Insights from the Margins and Global Intersections of China's Borderlands

I TIANLONG YOU is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology at Yunnan University, No. 2 Cuihu North Road, Wuhua District, Kunming, China (tyou0410@gmail.com).

Contemporary China studies: A call for reframing

In recent years, China studies have increasingly risked devolving into “Pekingology,”¹ an academic preoccupation with what happens in Beijing, emphasising central politics, macro-level interactions, and the dynamics at the very top of China's government and diplomacy. This tendency, though providing valuable insights into the decision-making processes and global strategies emanating from the centre, narrows the lens of inquiry to a single vantage point. It risks obscuring the nuanced realities of a country as vast and diverse as China, where local experiences and dynamics play equally critical roles in shaping the nation's trajectory. A key example is China's borderlands, which together also constitute the broader mosaic of China (You and Romero 2022; You and Yuan 2024).

Another concerning tendency of China studies is the rise of what might be termed “China's China obsession.”² This inward-looking approach, often bolstered by state initiatives to construct a distinct “China's independent knowledge system,”³ seeks to distinguish itself from the dominant Western-centric tradition. However, although many Chinese scholars have made commendable efforts to align their research with international standards and foster cross-cultural academic exchange, such efforts are increasingly overshadowed by a tendency to reinforce insularity and discourage engagement with global scholarship. The inward-looking approach has contributed to an increasingly politicised global academic community, in which intellectual exchanges and critical reflections are stifled by the growing prioritisation of ideological alignment and nationalistic imperatives over open and collaborative discourse.

Thus, the growing number of China studies researchers outside China fare no better. The intensification of geopolitical tensions has deepened the divide between China-based and foreign-based academics, eroding opportunities for mutual understanding. Scholars outside China, including those of Chinese origin, are often influenced by their countries' growing scepticism toward China. This has led to an increasing inclination to employ highly ideological frameworks when understanding developments within China, and an increasing alignment of their research with prevailing narratives to repeat and reinforce prevailing biases. While such approaches and other

currently popular intellectual paradigms may resonate with some, they risk prioritising ideological conformity over critical inquiry and analytical depth. Consequently, they often oversimplify China's complexities and provide interpretations shaped more by external political climates than by grounded, nuanced engagement with the realities within China.

Global China studies, which emphasise China's global influences, thus become an alternative for scholars who are unable to conduct fieldwork within China. These studies offer valuable insights into China's overseas presence and its global impacts. However, they also present significant shortcomings. By prioritising China's external dimensions, they risk neglecting internal complexities and local dynamics, which leads to an incomplete understanding. This approach may also reinforce monolithic narratives, framing China solely as a global actor while overlooking regional diversities. Additionally, reliance on secondary sources and external observations can lead to analytical gaps, as such studies often lack the grounded, nuanced perspectives that come from direct engagement with internal communities and institutions.

1. *Pekingology* is widely recognised as the title of a podcast produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. Also, a similarly named newsletter platform, *Pekingology*, created by Zichen Wang, offers a wealth of insights into China studies, with the name unintentionally misspelled, as noted by the author. Both platforms serve as innovative and valuable resources for scholars of China studies. However, in the context of this editorial – and with great respect to both programs – I use the term “Pekingology” to describe the academic focus on Beijing as the central locus of Chinese politics, governance, and international relations. This perspective emphasises elite decision-making, central policies, and macro-level interactions emanating from the capital. While it provides valuable insights into China's top-down governance structure and global strategies, *Pekingology* often overlooks the complexities and diversities of the country's regions and borderlands, resulting in a narrower understanding of China's broader sociopolitical and cultural dynamics.
2. Xing Tai 邢泰, “專訪戴博：中國和美國都把對方最大的弱點當成了唯一” (*Zhuanfang daibo: Zhongguo he Meiguo dou ba duifang zuida de ruodian dangcheng le weiyi*, Exclusive interview with Robert Daly: China and the United States each view the other's greatest weakness as their sole focus), *Initium Media* (端傳媒), 2 April 2020, <https://theinitium.com/zh-hans/article/20200403-international-us-china-relations-robert-daly> (accessed on 19 December 2024).
3. Lin Shangli 林尚立, “哲學社會科學的演進與中國自主知識體系的構建” (*Zhexue shehui kexue de yanjin yu Zhongguo zizhu zhishi tixi de goujian*, The evolution of philosophy and social sciences and the construction of China's independent knowledge system), *People's Daily* (人民日報), 9 December 2024, <http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/pc/attachment/202412/09/15cfac7e-f37a-4ee7-9a32-50dbec75ce3e.pdf> (accessed on 19 December 2024).

The view from China's borderlands: Domestic margins and global intersections

This special feature on China's borderlands seeks to address the challenges currently facing China studies at a critical crossroads. We intentionally shift the focus from the centre to the margins. Traditionally, borderlands have been understood primarily as spaces shaped and constrained by the centre, emphasising how Chinese regimes operate in and develop these peripheral areas. In contrast, the articles included in this special feature collectively explore how the margins, in turn, shape and influence the centre. China's borderlands are not passive recipients of central policies but active contributors to the formation of China, as well as Chineseness. These dynamics are both local and processual, functioning as a metaphor for China's pluralistic composition and as a symbol of its identity evolution. By examining these reciprocal influences, we highlight the critical role of borderlands in contributing to China's state building and challenge conventional narratives that view them as mere extensions of central authority.

Moreover, this issue moves beyond "China's China obsession" by focusing on borderlands where foreign influences historically intersect with domestic dynamics, creating complex, transnational interactions that cannot be fully understood through exclusively Chinese or non-Chinese perspectives. Instead, they demand a global perspective that regards them as crucial intersections of cultural exchange, economic connectivity, and geopolitical significance. Border studies challenge the idea of China as an isolated entity, emphasising that it is neither a self-contained actor coexisting alongside the rest of the world nor external to the global framework.⁴ Rather, China is deeply embedded in and shaped by global flows and forces. By centring the borderlands, we underscore their importance in examining China as an integral part of the global order. This approach transcends insular narratives, offering a more nuanced understanding of China's interconnectedness and the reciprocal influences shaping its role in the world.

Also, China's borderlands – positioned between China and neighbouring countries often regarded as developing, or part of the so-called Global South – offer a unique analytical space that resists the imposition of rigid nationalistic ideologies. Unlike studies focused on inland China, borderlands present a more fluid and interconnected reality. The shared challenges and interactions in these regions, which range from economic exchanges and cross-border migrations to cultural and environmental collaborations, demand analytical frameworks that transcend national agendas. The interdependence and mutual influences between China and its neighbours make it difficult for scholars to reduce these dynamics to binary, state-centred interpretations. Conversely, borderland studies promote an approach that is less ideologically constrained, that bridges divides and offers opportunities for dialogue that are often absent in more polarised academic discourses.

Last, China's borderlands, previously more accessible to foreign-based scholars, have become increasingly difficult to access directly without the support of a Chinese institution. However, they still offer unique opportunities for observation from the other side of the borders, which remain a vantage point for engaging with the global academic community. This transboundary advantage permits scholars to incorporate diverse viewpoints and fosters dialogue that transcends

the limitations of a single national framework. Moreover, the rapid rise of China has reshaped its borderlands, transforming them into dynamic spaces, as much as countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative. These transformations make the borderlands increasingly relevant to the broader literature on global China, highlighting their roles as sites of negotiation, adaptation, and influence in global economic, political, and cultural networks. By situating borderlands studies within this larger context, we can deepen our understanding of how China's emergence as a global power continues to redefine both its peripheries and their connections to the wider world.

Unpacking the contributions: A closer look at both issues on China's borderlands

This December special feature is a companion to the previous 138 issue of *China Perspectives*. Across these two special features, both dedicated to advancing studies of China's borderlands, we have made concerted efforts to address the challenges faced by contemporary China studies, as discussed above. While acknowledging the considerable influence of central policies, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, on the borderlands, which include, as articles of this special feature testify, infrastructure development (You and Zhang), poverty reduction (Juilien), and regional integration (Li and Gong), we shift our focus toward the lived experiences of individuals on the borderlands. We investigate how they adapt and respond to, leverage opportunities in, and sometimes resist these interventions. Several articles also highlight the role of local governments, which usually act as agents of economic development and play more dynamic and flexible roles than the security-oriented central government. Together, these contributions offer a nuanced and complex portrayal of China's borderlands, addressing a variety of previously understudied issues.

In these articles, our contributors demonstrate a strong interest in the dynamics of neighbouring countries, which exert varying degrees of influence on China's borderlands. For example, Peng, in the previous special feature, explores the evolution of illicit businesses in Myanmar against the backdrop of China's rise and highlights the interplay between regional economies and borderland dynamics (2024). Similarly, You and Zhang, in this issue, consider Myanmar's civil conflicts, fragmented governance, and ethnic relations and their profound impacts on China's borderland development, particularly on border infrastructure. These studies underscore that China's borderlands, as well as China, are not isolated but deeply integrated

4. See Yang Bin 楊斌, "多余的话: 博士论文不能承受之'重'" (*Duoyu de hua: Boshi lunwen buneng chengshou zhi "zhong,"* Excessive words: The "weight" a doctoral dissertation cannot bear), WeChat Blog *The Mountains with Clouds and Waters*, Room No. 1 (雲水山房一號), 22 November 2023, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/iXwWSLev-ixNLC2fRprXrA> (accessed on 19 December 2024). Dr Bin Yang, Professor of History at the City University of Hong Kong and a PhD graduate from Northeastern University, USA, is a renowned scholar in Chinese history, global history, and the history of science, technology, and medicine. His award-winning monograph, *Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE to Twentieth Century CE)* (2008), is a seminal work in border studies. It analyses Yunnan's transformation from a frontier to an integrated part of the Chinese state, emphasising its role as a crossroads of trade, culture, and governance. Highlighting Yunnan's active engagement with the Han Chinese state and its neighbours via trade routes such as the Tea Horse Road, Yang reframes borderlands as dynamic spaces of interaction and negotiation, challenging centre-periphery frameworks. His nuanced approach has profoundly shaped the understanding of China's borderlands and inspires this field of study.

in the world system. By examining these cross-border interactions, these articles effectively situate China within a broader global context, with an emphasis on the interdependencies that shape its borderland regions (Shi 2024).

The authors of this second special feature's articles adopt a neutral and balanced approach to examining the complex dynamics of China's border regions. Rather than adopting rigid nationalistic or state-centric narratives, the authors offer nuanced perspectives, especially on issues concerning local ethnic minority communities and foreign nationals (Juilien; You and Zhang). These perspectives enable a richer understanding of the multifaceted relationships between the central authorities, local populations, and neighbouring countries (Zhao 2024). By prioritising a grounded analysis of lived experiences and regional contexts, these articles open new avenues that are not necessarily or fully intended in the original agenda of central policies (Li and Gong).

The complexities of China's borderlands underline the need for global collaboration among scholars from around the world to uncover the dynamics at play on both sides – and across multiple sides – of these borders. Such collaborative efforts are particularly urgent in today's shifting global landscape, torn between the resurgence of nationalist rhetoric, the reemergence of inward-looking policies, and the deepening of ideological divides. Despite the apparent lack of success in achieving such collaboration in this special feature, given that most authors are based in Chinese institutions, we strongly believe that this collaborative approach not only enriches the field of borderland studies but also offers a counterpoint to the divisive trends shaping global academic and political discourse.

Examining the perspectives: Insights from the six articles

The two special features bring together six diverse and thought-provoking articles that collectively deepen our understanding of China's borderlands. Although each article is grounded in distinct regional, disciplinary, and thematic contexts, these issues converge in their effort to investigate the dynamic interplay of local, national, and global forces that shape these regions.

Cross-border economic activities take centre stage in Xiangyi Li and Zeyu Gong's article on multi-sited consumption in the Greater Bay Area. Their study investigates how cross-border mobilities and consumer behaviours, driven by national policies and urban transformations, lead to new patterns of urban specialisation and economic integration. This interplay between mobility and regional urban restructuring resonates with Tian Shi's ethnographic study of the Hmong community in the tri-state area of China, Vietnam, and Laos, published in the September special feature. Shi's article reveals how transnational networks and cultural capital enable the Hmong to navigate geopolitical changes, sustain livelihoods, and contribute to regional development (2024).

The complexity of borderland governance explored in Xuan Zhao's analysis of the China-Kazakhstan border in the September special feature resonates with David Juilien's article in the current one. Using a *dispositif* framework, Zhao examines the interplay of state sovereignty, local governance, and grassroots agency, revealing how

these forces shape border dynamics. The study highlights the uneven distribution of state control and the ways local actors adapt to and navigate state-imposed structures. Likewise, David Juilien's research of Nujiang, Yunnan, focuses on local protests and resident agency in response to state-led policies, which challenge central authority and expose tensions in territorial restructuring. Together, the two studies reveal the intricate power dynamics that define borderland governance.

Finally, Peng's investigation, in the September special feature, of Myanmar's ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) on the China-Myanmar borderland highlights the resilience and adaptability of local actors in response to geopolitical shifts. Through their engagement in illicit economies, EAOs exhibit how borderlands function as spaces of survival and resistance, where traditional and digital economies coexist and coevolve. Underscoring the interconnectedness of China's borderlands as dynamic spaces shaped by the interplay of mobility, governance, and local agency, this study offers fresh perspectives on how borderlands reflect and shape China's global and regional trajectories simultaneously.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, these two issues collectively highlight the transformation of China's borderlands from peripheral getaways to pivotal gateways that connect China to its neighbours and the broader global system. By reframing borderlands as dynamic spaces of interaction rather than static zones of state control, the articles address critical shortcomings in contemporary China studies. They challenge the centre-focused approach by foregrounding the agency of local actors, the influence of transnational networks, and the complexities of governance at the margins. This shift both enriches our understanding of China's borderlands and situates them as integral to the nation's engagement with the world, both regionally and globally.

The studies presented across two issues underscore the contributions of borderland studies in bridging the gap between local realities and global frameworks. From infrastructure development and regional trade networks to multi-sited consumption and adaptive governance, the articles demonstrate how borderlands function as both laboratories for innovation and arenas of negotiation. This broader focus highlights the interconnectedness of China's borderlands with global trends while maintaining a grounded understanding of their unique challenges and opportunities. By exploring these transformative dynamics, the two issues provide a foundation for future research that continues to position China's borderlands at the forefront of scholarly inquiry.

Acknowledgements

This study is partly funded by the "China Rural Social Survey," a key project in the newest round in the construction of Yunnan University as a "Double First-class University." I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Ming He from Yunnan University, a prominent figure in China, for his invaluable support and guidance over the past four years during my transition to studying the China-Southeast Asia border.

References

PENG, Xu. 2024. "Playing with Fire: How Engagement with Illicit Economies Shapes the Survival and Resilience of Ethnic Armed Organisations in the China-Myanmar Borderlands." *China Perspectives* 138: 9-20.

SHI, Tian. 2024. "Translocating Trajectories, Transnational Mobilities: The Cross-border Migration and Livelihoods of Hmong in the Tri-state Area Between China, Vietnam, and Laos." *China Perspectives* 138: 21-31.

YANG, Bin. 2008. *Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE to Twentieth Century CE)*. New York: Columbia University Press.

YOU, Tianlong, and Mary ROMERO. 2022. "China's Borderlands in the Post-globalization Era." *China Information* 36(3): 309-17.

YOU, Tianlong, and Ding YUAN. 2024. "Editorial: Global China's Borderlands: Contemporary Characteristics in a Historical Trajectory." *China Perspectives* 138: 3-8.

ZHAO, Xuan. 2024. "Border as *Dispositif*: Sovereignty, Discipline, and Governmentality at the China-Kazakhstan Border." *China Perspectives* 138: 33-44.