

Global China's Borderlands:

Contemporary Characteristics in a Historical Trajectory

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Borderland studies have been heavily influenced by Western perspectives, particularly focusing on the US-Mexico border and the de-bordering and re-bordering efforts made by European countries (Alvarez 1995; Donnan and Wilson 2012). In the US-Mexico context, much of the scholarship stresses issues of immigration, security, and economic integration, reflecting the geopolitical significance of this border in Western academia (De León 2015; Chávez 2016). In Europe, borders underwent a process of de-bordering through the formation of the European Union, but they are currently experiencing a re-bordering process due to migration crises and security concerns, which have further shaped the discourse around sovereignty, border control, the rise of populism, and the balance between security, economy, and human rights at the borders (Schimmelfennig 2021; Freire 2024). In contrast, border disputes in Africa and Asia, largely stemming from the arbitrary borders drawn during Western colonisation, have received limited attention in global borderland studies (Herbst 2000). Although these disputes, often involving contested territories and ethnic divisions, are significant, they are much fewer in number and less central to the Western-led border studies (Wastl-Walter 2011).

Scholars are increasingly advocating for a more global perspective that includes borderlands in non-Western contexts, as the de-westernisation of borderland studies is an emerging trend that seeks to expand the field beyond its historically Western-centric focus (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Wilson and Donnan 2016). China's borderlands, in particular, deserve greater attention (You and Romero 2022). With its complex history of ethnic diversity, geopolitical tensions, economic activities, and strategic significance in relation to its neighbours such as India, Russia, and Central and Southeast Asian nations, China's border areas offer rich opportunities for research (Rippa 2020a; Saxer and Zhang 2020). The development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's rising global impact further stress the need to study its borderlands through lenses of economics, security, and cultural interaction (Li 2019; Ptak et al. 2020; Rippa 2020b; Ptak and Konrad 2021; Dean, Sarma, and Rippa 2022).

As the three articles in this special feature demonstrate, borderlands can thus serve as a lens for understanding the transformations taking place within China domestically, as well as its evolving global role.

Current studies on China's borderlands, although aware of the need to move away from Western-centric fieldwork, unfortunately lack a comprehensive understanding of the historical and political context that has shaped both these regions and their analysis over the years. These studies often focus on issues such as migration, security, and economic development, but usually overlook the deeper historical roots of China's borderland dynamics. China's borderlands have been shaped by thousands of years of evolving interactions with neighbouring countries, reflecting shifting understandings of what constitutes "China" itself. From ancient tributary systems to encounters with nomadic empires, these complex relations have continuously redefined China's borders and its geopolitical landscape (Fairbank 1973; Purdue 2010). The influence of Western colonisation and the drawing of arbitrary borders have played a critical role in borderland disputes. In China, this picture has been further complicated by the various nation-building efforts, ethnic policies, and border management measures undertaken by the three consecutive regimes over the last century. Borderlands have been integral to China's political strategies, such as ethnic integration, territorial consolidation, and diplomatic relations. Without embedding these studies within the context of China's geopolitical history, its evolving political objectives across different regimes, and the continuity of its methods in managing certain affairs despite regime changes, much of the research risks providing a narrow, ahistorical view of borderland dynamics, missing the richness of the region's broader significance in China's long-term statecraft and development.

Therefore, this editorial first aims at providing an overview of the history of China's own borderland studies, a field locally born out of a sense of national crisis and inseparable from the larger history of China's nation-building project. Understanding the evolution of China's borderland studies indeed requires examining both the

historical contexts and social processes that continue to define the region's role in China's state-building and global position in the contemporary era. Thereafter, we will introduce the three articles constituting this special feature, and present the range of critical issues related to China's borderlands that they encompass, in the context of China's evolving role and rising global influence over its neighbouring countries. As a whole, we hope that this special feature will help deepen the understanding of border dynamics in China, through the lived experiences of local and cross-border communities.

The birth of China's borderland studies was mainly a response to Western colonial attempts. Borderlands were traditionally deemed frontier regions between China proper and tributary states over which central power diminished greatly (Fairbank 1942). As some tributary states adjacent to its borderlands, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Burma, were colonised by Western powers, the tributary system increasingly became the source of a deeper crisis for imperial China, which itself was defeated several times in the nineteenth century (Womack 2012). Through interactions with Western powers during their colonial adventure in Asia, Western concepts of the nation-state, sovereignty, borders, and other diplomatic norms of the treaty system were introduced to the Manchu-led Qing dynasty (Zhao S. 2004). Influenced by these transformative ideas, Chinese revolutionaries overthrew China's last imperial dynasty and established Asia's first republic (Schneider 2014). However, to completely inherit the vast territory of the Qing, the newborn Republic of China (ROC) cast aside anti-Manchu slogans, which were also considered hostile to other ethnic groups historically dwelling in the borderlands (Rhoads 2000), and employed a policy of ethnic relations termed "five races under one union" (*wuzu gonghe* 五族共和) (Fitzgerald 1998), calling for the harmonious coexistence of multiple ethnic groups within the same country (Larsen 2011).

The ROC quickly engaged in mutual agreements with France over the China-Vietnam boundary delimitation and with the United Kingdom over the China-Burma boundary delimitation, diplomatic endeavours usually considered a symbol of nation-building. However, the ROC, like its predecessor, could only exercise sharply diminished power in these borderlands (Lin 2004). No border defence forces and customs regimes were established along most of the ROC's borders, with the result that its territory was frequently violated by its neighbours. In 1931, Japan occupied Manchuria, China's northeastern frontiers, further stimulating its expansionist ambitions towards the whole of China. The Soviet Union had actively supported the secession of Outer Mongolia, China's northmost region, since the early days of the new republic (Elleman 1994). Likewise, the British Empire had made several attempts to influence Tibet during the 1930s, as the strength of the ROC weakened under Japanese invasion (McKay 1997). In 1934, the Soviet Union invaded Xinjiang and backed a regime that was on the verge of defeat by Kuomintang troops (Wang D. 1997). The escalating border crises in the 1920s and 1930s posed an existential threat to China's sovereignty and contributed to the birth of its borderland studies.

Amid the looming Japanese invasion of the 1930s, many elite Chinese universities established departments focused on borderland studies and border politics, as scholars turned their attention to the crises along China's borders (Wang H. 2011). Yunnan, a border province adjacent to British Burma and French Indochina, became

a refuge for these institutions during the Anti-Japanese War and naturally attracted the interest of leading patriotic scholars. This unexpected convergence of academic talent and institutions turned Yunnan into a vibrant centre for research, including borderland studies. In 1938, two scholars from Yenching University, Wu Wenzao 吳文藻, one of China's most prominent social scientists, and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, a distinguished historian who would later become a reference for the study of Chinese Muslims, joined Yunnan University and founded the Society for Borderland Studies (*Bianjiang yanjiuhui* 邊疆研究會) (Bai 1993). In 1941, Gu established the Society for the Translation of Borderland Languages (*Bianjiang yuwen bianyihui* 邊疆語文編譯會) and launched the *Magazine of Arts and History* (*Wenshi zazhi* 文史雜誌) (ibid.). Wu's seminal 1942 article, "The Outline of Borderland Politics" (*Bianzhengxue fafan* 邊政學發凡), outlined the purposes and significance of borderland studies and proposed interdisciplinary methods to study these regions through political science and anthropology (Lou 2009). Influenced by the Boasian school during his doctoral training in sociology at Columbia University, Wu stressed the central role of anthropology in understanding the local cultures and ethnic identities of the residents of China's borderlands (2010). Together, Wu and Gu pioneered China's borderland studies, steering three crucial disciplines – sociology, anthropology, and historical geography – into a collaborative framework that shaped this new field.

In the 1940s, China's borderland studies gained significant momentum as scholars, both local ethnic researchers¹ and those relocating from East China, focused on the pressing issues of national security and ethnic diversity along the southwest borders during World War II, since these borders were under the direct military threat of the Japanese army. Wu recruited many prominent young scholars, including Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, who played a crucial role in advancing scholarly understanding of this field. Tien Ju-Kang's 田汝康 1940 book, *Religious Cults of the Pai-I along the Burma-Yunnan Border* (*Mangshi bianmin de bai* 芒市邊民的擺), exemplified this focus by examining the Dai ethnic minority's religious practices, social structures, and cross-border interactions, which revealed how the spiritual and cultural life of the Dai was shaped by and contributed to maintaining their identity and cohesion in a complex borderland context influenced by both China and Burma (Tien 1986; Yang 2009). Another figure, Jiang Yingliang 江應樑² of Sun Yat-sen University, conducted research on cross-border ethnic minorities and published in 1944 *The Handbook for Administrative Personnel in the Borderlands* (*Bianjiang xingzheng ren yuan shouce* 邊疆行政人員手冊). Although this handbook was compiled as a guideline for the ROC government, it was marked as the first comprehensive analysis of border politics in China (Fu 2004). These developments also contributed to China's nation-building efforts, particularly in countering Japan's propaganda, which incited border ethnicities to secede from China. The significant debates about the concept of the Chinese nation between Fei and other scholars, in which

1. For example, Professor Fang Guoyu 方國瑜, a Naxi scholar from Lijiang City, is widely regarded as Yunnan's most prominent historian and historical geographer.

2. Professor Jiang Yingliang was born in Kunming City, Yunnan Province, and was a Hakka scholar well-known for his study on the Dai ethnic group.

Fei proposed the idea of “unity in diversity” (*duoyuan yiti* 多元一體), considerably influenced the ethnic policies of the Kuomintang, and eventually of the Chinese Communist Party after 1949 (Zhao X. 2018).

In the early decades of the new republic, China's renewed nation-building efforts, especially the ethnic classifications and the subsequent socio-historical investigations on all recently classified ethnic minorities, which trained a generation of emerging scholars such as You Zhong 尤中³, stimulated the development of borderland studies (Gong 1996; Fei 1997; State Ethnic Affairs Commission 2009). Simultaneously, Mao ordered historical geographers to produce a collection of historical maps of dynastic China, leading to rediscoveries of previously understudied historical regimes of ethnic minorities in the borderlands (Tan 1991; Pan 2015). During this period, border scholars from various disciplines were integral to the highest decision-making processes concerning ethnic and border affairs. For example, based on the advice of border scholars, the central government suspended land reform in certain border regions where local ethnic minorities were considered to be living in “primitive societies without class-based exploitation” (*bu cunzai jieji boxue de yuanshi shehui* 不存在階級剝削的原始社會) (Wang, You, and Zhang 2014). In addition, the central government pursued limited reforms through negotiations with ethnic groups that had strong cross-border ties to neighbouring countries, aiming to prevent their collective departure from China (Dreyer 1976; Barabantseva 2011). With the institutionalisation of China's borderland studies, this field has been increasingly influenced by the dogma of central policies, while also shaping China's policymaking in ethnic and border affairs.

During the Cultural Revolution, the historical geography strand of borderland studies remained heavily supported and endorsed by the central government, since the work of these researchers contributed significantly to the negotiations between China and its neighbours over borders' delimitations, while most social science disciplines were dismissed as serving capitalistic goals. Following a decade of disruption, the Chinese Centre for the Study of Historical Geography in Borderlands (*Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu zhongxin* 中國邊疆史地研究中心) and its official academic journal, *China's Borderland History and Geography Studies* (*Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 中國邊疆史地研究), were launched in 1983 under the newly formed Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This centre became the primary hub for borderland studies, housing the largest concentration of researchers in the field, while other social science disciplines that used to play greater roles in this field were slowly reestablished in a few universities across the country. Backed by national funding in the millions of RMB, historical geographers such as Li Dalong 李大龍 initiated large-scale research projects across China's borderlands in 2002, aiming to redefine borderland studies from a top-down perspective. Meanwhile, the attention of other social sciences began to shift towards China's border regions during the “borderland turn” (*bianjiang zhuanxiang* 邊疆轉向) (Ma 2014) marked by the Ministry of Education's establishment of the National Centre for Borderland Ethnic Studies in Southwest China (*Xinan bianjiang shaoshu minzu yanjiu zhongxin* 西南邊疆少數民族研究中心) at Yunnan University in 2001. This turn, driven by a bottom-up perspective, rebalanced archival studies with empirical studies

and restored the influence and voice of social scientists in this field. Furthermore, as social scientists increasingly focus on border regions, it has become natural for them to extend their research beyond China's borders into neighbouring countries, with many scholars turning to conduct studies in these regions, thus reviving the anthropological tradition of fieldwork on foreign soil. This shift is particularly relevant in the context of China's rise and its global ambitions, as studying neighbouring countries both enriches cross-border research and aligns with China's broader geopolitical strategy, reflecting its increasing influence in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and beyond. By doing so, scholars contribute to a deeper understanding of transnational dynamics and offer policy insights into China's expanding role in regional and global affairs.

This shift towards more globalised studies aligns with China's growing global influence. The three articles in this special issue illustrate the nuanced and complex implications of such global influence. The article authored by Xu Peng investigates the relationship between Myanmar's ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and their illicit economies in the China-Myanmar borderlands over time. By employing a spatio-temporal approach, this article identifies three types of illicit economies in different times as the result of their coping with the evolving political landscape in this area heavily exploited by EAOs as a form of unique resource. The paper argues that these interactions are not linear but rather are marked by reciprocal influences that span various historical periods. This analysis of the relationship between non-state armed forces and illicit economies further underlines the complexity of the contested borderland. In this article, while China is not portrayed as playing an active role in the development of these illicit economies, its economic boom, which has increased the wealth of ordinary Chinese citizens, has provided the foundation for the flourishing of illicit activities such as drug trafficking, gambling, and online scams. These activities, in turn, objectively enhance the resilience of EAOs and contribute to their survival in a prolonged civil war in Myanmar, leading to continued regional instability that threatens China's BRI strategic arrangements in relation to Myanmar and Southeast Asia. In this context, an external actor beyond China's borders can exert influence on domestic affairs within China.

Tian Shi's article bridges this dynamic by exploring the cross-border migration and livelihoods of the Hmong people in the tri-state area of China, Vietnam, and Laos. It examines how the Hmong navigate geopolitical and economic challenges by leveraging their cultural and linguistic capital to thrive in transnational networks. Through multi-site ethnographic research, Shi reveals how the Hmong engage in industries such as tourism, hospitality, and trade, all while maintaining their traditional clan systems and entrepreneurial practices. This paper stresses how South-South cooperation, especially China's involvement in the Greater Mekong Subregion, has created opportunities for the Hmong, and their ability to capitalise on these developments illustrates how China's regional engagement indirectly influences cross-border ethnic communities. China's infrastructural investments and regional integration efforts open up new avenues for marginalised groups such as the Hmong,

3. Professor Zhong You was born in Xuanwei City, Yunnan Province.

and also embed them within broader geopolitical frameworks. Thus, the Hmong's transborder mobility and adaptive strategies exemplify larger trends of regional cooperation and the socio-economic effects of China's growing influence in Southeast Asia.

Instead of predominantly focusing on the agency of ordinary border crossers, Xuan Zhao's article shifts the focus to explore the multilayered governance structures at Khorgas, a crucial port along the China-Kazakhstan border. Employing Foucault's *dispositif* framework, the study examines how sovereignty, discipline, and governance converge to reshape border dynamics, emphasising how state power is both asserted and negotiated in this transnational space. Khorgas, strategically located within the BRI framework, serves as a critical hub for extending China's geopolitical and economic influence into Central Asia and beyond. The article highlights how China's investments in infrastructure, its regulatory frameworks, and trade policies at Khorgas constitute a new form of border governance that seeks to balance security concerns with economic development goals. Also, this paper explores how local economic actors such as "Camel Teams" adapt to and manoeuvre through this governance structure, using their individual and collective agency to operate within the maze-like system. By adopting the *dispositif* framework, the article offers a nuanced understanding of borders as more than physical barriers – they are sites of governance, economic exchange, and social negotiation that reflect China's regional integration strategies and global ambitions.

Through these three articles, we can easily identify key elements of China's border strategies – ethnic integration, economic development, national security, and global ambition – all of which are central to China's broader nation-building efforts. These policies, which have evolved since the late Qing dynasty, exhibit new characteristics as China continues its rise as a global power. Ethnic issues remain crucial as far as border management policies are concerned. In these articles, cross-border ethnic groups are examined from a fresh perspective. Beyond simply consolidating central control over diverse borderlands and minimising internal resistance or potential departure as in the past, China is now increasingly proactive in leveraging certain ethnic minorities, particularly those in strategic regions, as agents to extend its influence beyond its borders. This trend, however, is more pronounced in some borderlands and among specific minorities, especially those with significant cross-border ties. Economic development is another pillar of China's border strategy, as seen in policies that promote infrastructure investments, trade opportunities, and tourism in peripheral regions. These efforts not only aim at lifting the living standards of local populations but also at integrating borderlands into the national economy and fostering stability. The argument of national security, associated with economic and ethnic issues, is strongly emphasised in relation to border regions, aiming at protecting them from external threats and illicit trade. This is particularly significant as China's growing influence in regions such as Central Asia and Southeast Asia creates new geopolitical challenges. Finally, China's global ambition is increasingly evident in its border strategies, particularly as the BRI extends China's reach into neighbouring countries. Border regions such as Khorgas become key nodes in China's international trade networks, further embedding borderlands into China's global strategy. As China rises as a global power, its border control seamlessly blends historical practices with

contemporary priorities, strengthening its influence both domestically and internationally.

This special feature of *China Perspectives* offers critical insights into China's evolving border management strategies, ethnic integration policies, and cross-border dynamics, shedding new light on China's broader geopolitical ambitions. The articles featured here significantly contribute to the academic understanding of China's borderlands. By examining the complex relationship between state power, economic integration, and cross-border ethnic communities, this section offers valuable perspectives for scholars interested in border security, regional development, and international cooperation. This collection of work is very timely as China continues to extend its influence beyond its borders, making the study of its borderlands crucial for understanding the future trajectory of its domestic and foreign policies. As such, this special section will serve as a valuable resource for a global audience engaged in China studies and international relations. Lastly, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to Yunnan University for its generous support in making this project possible. Special thanks also go to the editorial office of *China Perspectives*, the contributors for their insightful research, and all those involved in bringing this important collection of work to fruition.

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