

Alessandro Rippa, *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development and Control in Western China*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 282 pp. ISBN 9789463725606

Alessandro Rippa's book offers an instructive conceptualisation of the relationship between development and state control in Western China's borderlands as it unfolds under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Drawing upon archival research and ethnographic fieldwork from 2009 to 2018, the book presents six case studies of development processes linked to infrastructural projects in Xinjiang and Yunnan. The case studies are assembled in an elegant narrative composition. In three parts of the book – each divided into two chapters, an interlude and a coda – Rippa discusses three key concepts, namely *proximity*, *curation* and *corridor*. Each part of the book outlines historical cross-border mobilities in Xinjiang and Yunnan, policies and imaginaries of transnational connectivity and modernity in China's BRI era, as well as processes of inclusion and exclusion of borderland inhabitants. While each chapter could be read as an independent case study, the combination of the three key concepts renders the book in its entirety a productive conceptual toolbox for understanding development in Western China's borderlands and beyond.

The first part of the book introduces the concept of *proximity*, which characterises local historical forms of cross-border mobilities that are often based on shared kinship, culture and language. In the current era, this informal form of proximity is often ignored and eroded by the Chinese party-state's future-oriented visions of large-scale infrastructures as tools for development. Chapter One discusses how state visions of connectivity, which are materialised in BRI projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), are reshaping a network-based cross-border shuttle trade between Tashkurgan in Xinjiang and Pakistan. Chapter Two then first outlines a history of cross-border connectivities that have linked Yunnan to neighbouring Burma. In the historical context of what Enze Han (2019) calls 'asymmetrical neighbouring' between China and Burma, both Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) troops, the Chinese-backed Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and Chinese traders from Tengchong in Yunnan have

This article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.22439/cjas.v41i1.6888>.

© Henrik Kloppenborg Møller

Published under the Creative Commons License (CC BY).

shaped the contemporary configuration of often illegal resource extraction in Northern Burma and its concurrent ethnic conflicts. The chapter suggests that after a Chinese logging ban in 1998, private Chinese importers and traders of illegally logged Burmese timber facilitated the construction of roads and border crossings to Burma. Rippa does not provide much concrete information about the character and extent of private initiatives in advocating and/or funding this infrastructure to back up this claim. However, this is a minor shortfall, because Rippa focuses on the ensuing consolidation of Chinese state presence in the Yunnan-Burma borderlands, which highlights a productive relationship between illegal economies and state power that is often overlooked.

Part Two of the book introduces the concept of *curation* to show how state power in China's borderlands works to produce and stage 'modern' subjects that are loyal and grateful to the party-state. Curation (lat. *Curare*) has the connotations of 'curing' and 'preserving', which Rippa convincingly brings to bear upon how the Chinese state seeks to transform or eradicate certain aspects of ethnic minority culture while preserving others for heritage showcasing and tourist consumption. Chapter Three discusses how forest preservation policies, discourses on population 'quality' (*suzhi*), government aid and resettlement in the remote Dulong valley in Northern Yunnan combined make the ethnic Drung people there almost entirely dependent on state subsidies. The Drung previously practised swidden agriculture, but are given rice, cash and new housing in return for reforesting their fields, and state policies and discourses materialise as an 'economy of dependence' (p.118) and a 'paternalistic discourse of care' (p.121). Curation here signifies how development is showcased as a 'healing' process that lifts 'primitive' ethnic minorities out of poverty and into modernity. Development thereby bolsters the control and legitimacy of the party-state, while modernity entails increased dependency on government support for the Drung. The impression of totalising state power might have been balanced by information about alternatives to complete reliance on state subsidies for Drung livelihoods (small-scale farming and black cardamom trade are briefly mentioned). Also, Rippa quotes Stéphane Gros (2010: 42 in Rippa 2020: 126) for arguing that Drung claims to power must be validated by generosity and that state aid is therefore an integral part of its legitimacy. Here, a consideration of whether Drung political cosmology holds arsenal for counter-claims to state legitimacy could have been added for nuance.

Chapter Four discusses how the almost complete reconstruction of Kashgar's old town aimed to render the Xinjiang city a modern hub on China's Belt and Road and created an 'Islamic Disneyland' in which the local Xinjiang Uyghurs were commodified for Mainland Chinese tourist consumption. Curation here involves preserving innocuous exotic aspects of local ethnic culture through heritage-making while suppressing aspects associated with terrorism in the Chinese post-9/11 security paradigm. As Rippa notes, 'Uyghurs can sing and dance [...] but should not pray, fast or refuse alcohol' (p. 160). Foucault's concepts of power, governmentality and subject underpin Rippa's analysis of policies, propaganda material and visual displays as manifestations of a state power aimed at transforming particular subjects. Accordingly, it almost becomes difficult to imagine the Drung and Uyghurs outside state power. While imaginaries of Kashgar as a BRI hub led to real-estate investments, security concerns and restrictions of mobility eventually curbed economic opportunities for many. This process encapsulates the central argument of the book, namely that development in China serves political purposes of control more so than economic ones.

The third part of the book discusses how the *corridor* – a key concept in many large-scale infrastructural projects under the BRI and beyond – enables movement and channeled control while removing and blocking what is outside its path. Chapter Five focuses on Kashgaris (Uyghurs in Pakistan), who have historically conducted cross-border trade with Xinjiang through the Karakoram Highway. After 11 September 2001, Chinese authorities began to interact with the Kashgari community in Pakistan through the Overseas Chinese Association and the Xinjiang Overseas Exchange Association. The association aided in visa applications and sent loyal Kashgari's children to Chinese top universities while establishing databases of overseas Xinjiang Uyghurs and aiding in 'finding terrorists' in Pakistan. Increased security measures, such as checkpoints and stricter visa regulations meant that many Kashgaris and Xinjiang Uyghurs lost their advantages in the Karakoram Highway cross-border trade. While the BRI is promoted to foster cross-border ties, state control and securitisation result in restricted mobility and exclusion of groups like the Kashgaris and Xinjiang Uyghurs.

Chapter Six brings us back to the Yunnan-Burma borderlands; more precisely to the Houqiao Border Trade Zone, which was developed due to illegal timber trade. While Beijing put an end to the bulk of the illegal timber trade to appease Naypyidaw, timber was replaced by Burmese amber and other gemstones. The categories legal, illegal,

licit and illicit are often separated in official discourse but are fluid in practice. Burmese gemstones commonly enter China untaxed by means of smuggling or bribing of border guards, but are generally considered legal once in China. As in the case of timber, Rippa argues that private amber traders 'brought in' the state, in this case through the establishment of the Tengchong Amber Association. Members of the association hoped formalisation of the trade would help stabilise prices, eradicate counterfeit amber, mediate disputes and set low taxes. Elsewhere, Rippa quotes John Osburg's (2013) study of the intimate entanglement of Chinese private entrepreneurs and government officials in elite networks (p. 133). If the Tengchong Amber Association is similar in composition to the Ruili Gemstone Association in the nearby border town of Ruili, some members of which are both elite jade traders and government officials, the reader might question the extent to which the state can be considered an entirely distinct entity to the elite gem trading networks it was 'brought into'. However, as in Chapter Two on timber trade, Rippa's focus is on the nexus of informal trade, infrastructure and state control, which here leads to the formalisation and institutionalisation of informal economies. In this respect, Rippa offers a compelling conceptualisation of how 'corridor-isation' - in this case through the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor - was imposed upon an infrastructure established to cater to one illegal trade (in timber) and then served to institutionalise another illegal trade (in amber). As in the cross-border trade of other Burmese gemstones such as jade, this process benefits Yunnanese elite traders, while rendering Burmese smugglers and small-scale traders replaceable.

The overall argument in *Borderland Infrastructures* is that while state policies and discourses on infrastructure fuel imaginaries of transnational connectivity and economic prosperity, development serves economic goals less so than it is a political process aimed at making China's borderlands and their inhabitants legible to state control. In many cases, current borderland development of infrastructures, such as highways, Border Trade Zones and economic corridors, ignores and does away with a pre-existing proximity that is based on shared cross-border kinship, culture and language. While this process often marginalises local ethnic minorities, the formalisation and institutionalisation of illicit trade along new infrastructure benefits elite traders with political connections. The goal and ideal effect of this development process, the book argues, is a consolidation of state territorialisation

that produces and displays 'modern' borderland citizens that are loyal to the Chinese party-state. *Borderland Infrastructures* is in that sense a study of Chinese state power as it materialises in the margins of the nation, where it is often most visible. The study makes ample use of analysis of policy documents and visual materials such as murals and architecture, but is also supported by the voices of a plethora of borderland interlocutors, who have created informal forms of proximity that precede the current era of state curation and corridor-isation. Such marginal borderland histories, which are proficiently detailed in the book, are important for understanding the ambiguities that unfold in the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Providing a rich and original conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between development processes and state power in China, *Borderland Infrastructures* is a highly recommended read for students and scholars across disciplines, including political and economic anthropology, borderland studies, development studies and Asian studies.

Henrik Kloppenborg Møller
Carlsberg Visiting Research Fellow
Global Sustainable Development
University of Warwick

REFERENCES

- Gros, Stéphane 2010. "Economic Marginalization and Social Identity among the Drung People of Northwest Yunnan". In J. Michaud and T. Forsyth (eds.) *Moving Mountains: Highland Livelihood and Ethnicity in China, Vietnam and Laos*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, pp. 28-49.
- Han, Enze 2019. *Asymmetrical Neighbors: Borderland State Building between China and Southeast Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Osburg, John 2013. *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.