

Trans-Himalayan Borderlands: Livelihoods, Territorialities, Modernities

edited by Dan Smyer Yü and Jean Michaud. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 2017, 310 pp., 29 black and white illustrations, ISBN 978 94 6298 192 8.

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Published in 2017, this volume, an anthology of twelve essays by Chinese, European and North American social scientists, is an inaugural, multinational, collaborative project run by the Center for Trans-Himalayan Studies (CTHS) at China's Yunnan Minzu University (YMU). Its genealogy includes conferences and workshops held between 2013 and 2015 by The New School, The Yale Himalaya Initiative and lastly YMU. These events all explored new ground in Himalayan studies by focusing on connectivity, inclusion and new voices in the region from a transboundary perspective.

The first thing that might catch the eye of many a reader on first seeing this volume is its title, 'Trans-Himalayan Borderlands', a seemingly questionable nomenclature once one goes through the Table of Contents. A cursory glance shows that of the twelve studies presented in this book, at best only four – the chapters by Sara Schneiderman, Dan Smyer Yü, Hildegard Diemberger and Brendan Galipeau – relate to sites in the 'Trans-Himalayas', if this term is to be understood according to its widespread conventional usage in ecology (eg Shrestha 2000: 1–2) and geology (eg Sorkhabi 2010). This conventional scientific usage traces its etymology to Cunningham (1854) and Hedin (1909–1913), and signifies the region of high-altitude ranges, valleys and plateaus with generally arid or semi-arid biomes that starts immediately north of the Great Himalayan Range, is bound in the north by the rough continuum of Kailas and Nyechedthangla ranges, and in the east extends beyond Lhasa. The other chapters represent studies conducted in regions that are rather distant and eco-geologically very distinct from the Trans-Himalayas as understood in the above-mentioned sense, such as the lower Himalayas of Uttarakhand and Nepal, the Thai-Myanmar border and China's borderlands with Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos.

In the Introduction, Dan Smyer Yü – the founding director of CTHS and one of the volume's two editors – goes to great lengths to spell out a novel connotation of the term 'Trans-Himalayas', which forms a common conceptual and regional thread for the essays in this book. While aware of the colonial etymology of 'Trans-Himalayas', Smyer Yü shifts the emphasis onto the prefix 'Trans', so as to signify a 'transboundary area' (p. 17) that cuts across the Himalayas to include contiguous highland regions of Asia that possess 'a "spatial cohesion"... an entwinement of eco-geological forces as well as translingual connections, religious affiliations, civilizational encounters, and commercial interactions' (p. 17). This revisioning helps to reconceive the Himalayas and other proximate Asian highlands as 'a multiple-state space' wherein adjacent borderlands of modern nation states are acknowledged as a 'continuous zone rather than disconnected spaces'. Historic ties of intercommunal and interregional trade, transhumance and pilgrimage (p. 16) enabled by the porosity of the Himalayas (p. 12–14), though often disrupted by the fraught border demarcations brought about by 'contended national sovereignties' (p. 16), form the basis for this new imaginary.

The 'High Asia' in this volume includes 'the Central Himalayas (including their Northeast India, upland Bangladesh, Nepali, and Bhutani peripheries), Mainland Southeast Asia, Southwest China, and Northwest China including the Tibetan Plateau' (p. 17): a region broadly overlapping Van Schendel's 'Zomia' (2002), exclusive of the extensions he added in 2007, which include Xinjiang and a large part of Central Asia (p. 17, 22). However, Smyer Yü's efforts at redefining the 'Trans-Himalayas' are somewhat undermined by his frequent usage of 'Zomia' (p. 12, 17, 21, 22) and its indexically related terms 'High Asia' (p. 16, 17, 18), 'great Himalayas' (p. 16), and 'greater Himalayas' (p. 36). Nonetheless, the use, ultimately, of 'Trans-Himalayan borderlands' rather than of 'Zomia' in the title of this volume derives perhaps from the recent but growing discursive practice in Chinese academic and policy circles of referring to countries along China's southern and western borders as a 'Trans-Himalayan area' (eg Wang 2018). This discursive practice seems to be in keeping with Van Schendel's (2002) argumentation for the disciplinary need to recognise Zomia as an 'area' with a substantial 'theoretical problematique' (Van Schendel 2002: 654). At the same time, it appears to be an effect of contemporary China's economic and geopolitical engagements with its

southern and western neighbours, often transcending the borders of these states that often overlap the Himalayas.

The chapters in this book are divided into two groups. The first group, consisting of five chapters, relates to the trans-thematic 'Territory, Worldviews and Power through Time'. Each of these chapters represents a study that explores 'the cross-border flows that existed prior to the establishment of the modern sovereign nation and that are now considered illegal or illicit by modern national and international legal definitions' (p. 28). These chapters also explore some of the ways in which colonisation processes or modern nation-building affected these flows. Jean Michaud's chapter illustrates how the modernisation and developmental projects of nation states in the Himalayan uplands – from those of Northeast India, through Southwest China, to mainland South East Asia – have often been based on a poor, often prejudice-ridden understanding of these regions' complex ethnolinguistic diversity among their lowland political masters. In several instances, this has led to violent ethnic movements, the loss of upland livelihoods and mass migration to the lowlands. Sara Schneiderman's chapter narrows the focus from Michaud's broader canvas to three districts in Nepal – Banke, Dolakha and Mustang – while investigating the different histories and present-day implications of notions of territory for the peoples, both indigenous and migrant, residing in these districts. She shows that notions of territory emerge from both affective ties to the land and from administrative contours designating place, and that these notions of territorial belongingness, as essential parts of identity formation, need to be taken into account in Nepal's ongoing political restructuring.

Dan Smyer Yü's chapter discusses how, along Tibet's contested Himalayan border, the notion of territory currently becomes an exclusively top-down, administrative exercise of 'cartographic slicing' between China and India, with the roots of these territorial claims lying in the Manchu and the British imperial imagination. This process becomes bereft of affective consciousness of Tibetan territory and yet sees the Dalai Lama's secularity – taken in the sense of 'public expressions of religion and institutional appropriations of religious practices for nonreligious purposes' (p. 86) –, especially within Indian policy circles and the Tibetan exile community, as a key card in settling the Tibet issue. Hildegard Diemberger's chapter explores how

the 'galaxy of communities' linked by Tibetan Buddhism in the upper Himalayas of Nepal and Tibet have for centuries been engaged in an intense, transnational web of interdependent connections, through material flows and exchange loops in the production of sacred books. The geopolitical restructuring of the Himalayas in the second half of the twentieth century led, after a temporary pause, to a new, ongoing configuring of 'imagined and virtual geographies' (p. 106) sketched by scriptures in digital form. Finally, Gunnel Cederlöf's chapter presents an archival study of British colonial encounters, in the early nineteenth century, with pre-existing trade networks of the southwest Silk Road, which linked diverse ethnolinguistic communities in a region spanning Assam, Burma and Yunnan. It uncovers the complex pre-existing cross-boundary alliances and regional tensions that found new arenas during the colonial project, thus complicating the simplistic asymmetry represented by coloniser-colonised binary (p. 141).

The seven chapters making up the second group are linked together by the trans-thematic 'Livelihood Reconstructions, Flows, and Trans-Himalayan Modernities'. Each of these chapters represents a study that explores 'livelihood reconstruction in the context of transborder and transboundary modernization processes in the southern Himalayas, Southeast Asia, and Southwest China' (p. 31). Georgina Drew's chapter reports on an ethnographic and discursive enquiry into the politics of building the Tehri Dam, a massive hydroelectric project in the Garwhal Himalayas of India, on the River Ganga, a holy river for the Hindus. In illustrating the divergent responses from the state, from religious spokespersons and from environmentalists to this development project – which has a fixed expiry date – this study makes a case for 'examining modernity's influence alongside the distinct ways of being and behaving in the world that persist' (p. 163). Alexander Horstmann's chapter on the humanitarian aid programmes for the war- and repression-stricken Karen people in the Thai–Myanmar borderlands reveals the 'everyday politics of humanitarianism' (p. 169). Humanitarianism emerges as a complex terrain with a plurality of agendas and indeed with biases based on local actors' affinities and intimate links with international humanitarian and religious organisations.

Yang Cheng's chapter studies the impact the displacement of farmers in Kunming, China, due to construction work under China's

most significant 'Trans-Himalayan' economic project in present times, the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, has had on their livelihoods. An insufficient level of income under this irreversible urbanisation has led these displaced farmers to rent farmland within commuting distance of Kunming to supplement their income and to increase their social respectability, in what Yang Cheng calls 'circular livelihoods' (p. 191). Brendan Galipeau's chapter describes how in Shangrila (northwestern Yunnan) Catholic Tibetans have successfully dug out an economic niche in home winemaking and its marketing, while building on state-sanctioned viticulture for economic development and on their heritage of winemaking by nineteenth-century French missionaries. He uses Demossier's notion of 'terroir' (p. 216) in the context of Shangrila to discuss how the Catholic Tibetans successfully market their wines, orienting their marketing campaigns to combine the paradisiac notions of Shangrila and of the wine-growing countries of their European Catholic progenitors. Delving into the tea-offering rituals during annual festivals among the De'ang people of western Yunnan – historically, a tea-growing community – Li Quanmin constructs the notion of a 'merit-landscape' (p. 231), wherein the offering of tea to Buddhist ritual masters by De'ang tea growers eventually comes back to them as merit for the tea growers and as blessings for the landscape. This merit-landscape is shown to keep alive and to sustain an affectively rooted, traditional sense of livelihood and territory amidst growing pressure and competition from neighbouring cash-cropping communities.

Li Yunxia's chapter studies the agency of the transboundary Akha community along the Yunnan–Laos border in optimising economic opportunities in rubber production and trading, particularly within Laos, enabled by the loosening of the flows of labour, capital and goods by the Chinese and Laotian states. She posits frontiers as a space of multiple engagements enabling the Lao Akha to experiment with a spectrum of social and economic opportunities as they transition from a subsistence-oriented livelihood to a market-based one (p. 243). Similarly, the last of the second set of chapters, by Sarah Turner, presents a case study of increasingly commoditised black cardamom farming and trading among the Yao and Hmong communities of upland Vietnam, along the border with Yunnan. Though strengthening and sustaining historic transborder networks and links, this livelihood creates an uneven playing field, with

differential economic returns for the actors and ethnicities located at different points along the black cardamom supply chain.

All the chapters in the book are striking for their dense, long-term ethnographic and/or historic engagements with the communities and themes they seek to investigate. The geographic scope, together with the transboundary and transnational relevance of the issues discussed in each of the chapters, creates a finely textured panorama of the dynamic, charged, interconnected and yet constantly reinvented 'Trans-Himalayan borderlands'. This volume helps to create a consciousness of the 'sticky materiality of practical encounters' (Tsing 2004) that permeates the responses, resistances and negotiations of transboundary histories, the ethnolinguistic ties – between peoples and between peoples and landscapes, and trade and religious networks – to the forces of modernity, nation-building, globalisation and technological revolutions. Overall, these case studies, firmly rooted in places, cultures and histories, fully illustrate Jean Michaud's contention in the volume's Conclusion that 'ethnically rooted agency' plays a key role in 'local interpretations and translations of global commands and engagements' and in decision-making regarding livelihoods in the 'Trans-Himalayan borderlands', but is often 'ignored or dismissed in development initiatives' (p. 291–292). This volume is indeed a valuable contribution to the growing discourse on Zomia and bears much relevance outside academia, particularly for development agencies, intergovernmental organisations, humanitarian organisations and indeed also for the informed traveller. One factual error in this book, however, that merits a mention is Smyer Yü's chronological misattribution of the Shimla Convention, where 'the McMahon Line was drawn', to the year '1941' and thereon to 'the Sino-Indian border wars [that] broke out 20 years later' (p. 15). The Shimla Convention, where the McMahon Line was drawn, was signed in 1914 and the Sino-Indian border wars occurred in 1962, nearly fifty years later.

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