

The Art of Neighbouring: Making Relations across China's Borders

edited by Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 2017, 268 pp., 19 figures, ISBN 978-94-6298-258-1, EUR 95.

Reviewed by Himani Upadhyaya

The Art of Neighbouring offers multidisciplinary analyses of neighbouring relations in post-Cold-War Asia in ten lucid, individually authored chapters on 'borderworlds' in and around China. It gathers together contributions from human geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and historians who draw attention to the peripheries of China, which boasts a total of 22,000 km of land borders with 14 countries. Published as part of the Asian Borderlands book series, this book is of particular relevance to scholars and researchers of borderland studies in general and of Himalayan studies in particular. It extends the temporal frame of scholarly discussions on *Zomia* to beyond the 1950s, where James Scott's hypothesis about upland South East Asia ends (Scott 2009), and shows that contact and exchange offer a more productive lens to understand everyday experiences and processes in borderlands from the 1950s onwards. Neighbouring rather than governing, write the editors, is a better way to understand contemporary interactions in China's margins where 'seeking fortune' is as much a reality as 'seeking refuge' (p. 21).

What does the concept of neighbouring have to offer that is new? The editors address this concern primarily with respect to scholarship on China. An attempt is made to move forwards from the conventional Sinocentric approach of the old Fairbankian tributary model as well as contemporary statist celebrations of 'Good Neighbourly Diplomacy' and the 'peaceful rise' of China where the asymmetries embedded in the country's neighbouring patterns are elided. The book shifts its focus to the peripheries to bring out experiences, realities and smaller-scale processes of change. Neighbouring is presented not just as a geographically bounded experience but also as an agential force that

allows the forging of new relations despite geographical limitations. However, this agentive force, as Zhang's chapter highlights most clearly, is also inherently unstable and unpredictable, often in need of being re-enacted.

The chapters are organised into three thematic divisions: Borderworlds, Neighbouring Beyond Proximity and Agonistic Intensities. The first set of chapters, generically entitled Borderworlds, gives us a localised view of interconnected borderworlds along China's borders with Russia, northern Laos and Nepal. Franck Billé gives a fascinating account of the 'generative power of neighbouring' following the opening up of the Sino-Russian borders in 1989 (p. 35). The twin cities, the newly founded and magnificently illuminated Heihe (China) and the older, mid-nineteenth-century, sleepy Russian city of Blagoveshchensk, represent a case of 'mimetic rivalry' whereby each city borrows inspiration from its neighbourly other but appropriates it in unique ways. In Pal Nyiri's account of Chinese 'instant cities' built by Chinese investors in one of the poorest and remotest parts of South East Asia, northern Laos, we see how promises of infrastructural development are entangled with promises of and aspirations for urban modernity arising from the area's integration within the global economy. However, while the rise of China in some cases promises forward-looking modernity to borderlanders, for others, it also evokes nostalgia for a bygone period of thriving trans-Himalayan trade, which drives the community's aspirations, as Martin Saxer illustrates in his chapter on the politics of two recent road-building projects in Nepal's Humla district.

The second section 'Neighbouring Beyond Proximity' discusses cases and contexts where the forging of neighbouring relations is not limited by distance. The chapters are seemingly somewhat varied in terms of their approach. In the bazaars in borderlands of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang, neighbouring relations spread across a network of distant nodes that are crucial points of connection, interaction and exchange. With respect to these relations, Henryk Alyff illustrates that elasticity is embedded in neighbouring and that it is founded not just in financial capital but also in dynamically changing social capital, namely ethnic and linguistic affiliations. Uradyn E. Bulag's chapter on Mongolia's Third Neighbour Diplomacy is pertinent to the theme of this section, though it fits somewhat oddly into the book because it takes

us back to the macro-framework of international relations. Mongolia's ingenious neighbouring strategy of relation-making and 'collaborative nationalism' with far-off countries, such as the USA and Japan, is seen as an attempt to negotiate its historical and geopolitical predicaments of being bounded by Russia and China (p. 132). The third chapter by Tina Harris examines unevenness in experiences and processes of trade and exchange through the newly opened Nathu La pass in the Himalayan borderlands of India, Tibet/China and Nepal, focusing on three facets – roads, vehicles and (border)lands.

'Agonistic Intensities' is the most cohesive section of the book. The phrase, borrowed from Bhargupati Singh's concept of 'agonistic intimacy', describes situations where conflict remains 'co-present with modes of relatedness' and shared aspirations (Singh 2011). Chris Vasantkumar's nuanced work throws light on the seemingly odd figure of the Tibetan migrant who has returned to China in pursuit of prosperity promised by recent Chinese economic policies. He argues that Tibetan refugees navigate and negotiate these worlds in all their odd complexities and that neighbouring China cannot be seen as a fixed or inherently antagonistic relation. Unlike Tibetan 'odd migrant' returnees, Burmese Muslims from Myanmar, a historically persecuted minority, migrate to Yunnan in China where they have found and fostered a newer and safer haven in recent decades. Renaud Egretteau points out that their brokering skills, networks of contacts and traditional association with the gem and jade industry have enabled them to fill an economic niche as 'essential outsiders' in trading towns on China's border (p. 190). Juan Zhang foregrounds the inherently precarious and fragile nature of neighbouring relations with respect to trade relations on the Sino-Vietnamese border. She discusses an incident at the International Trade Fair in 2007, which resonated with the complex trajectory of Sino-Vietnamese relations before and after the brutal border war of 1979. Neighbourly harmony, she writes, is to be found in constant practice, in the perpetual need for construction and reinforcement. The last chapter by Magnus Fiskesjo stands out from the others because of its subject and style of writing. The writer finds neighbouring a pertinent framework for understanding human-animal relations and rues the 'heavily anthropogenic and human-dominated landscape' in China, the most populous country, where the animal population and diversity have drastically decreased (p.224). He draws on

other scholars to argue that China's 'state-engineered anthropocentrism' has deeper roots in Confucian philosophy and statecraft. The latter have in turn shaped neighbouring relations vis-à-vis human Others in the past as well as in the present.

The Art of Neighbouring gives us rich and varied accounts that adopt critical approaches to contemporary developments in areas bordering China. Most contributors succeed in engaging us with neighbouring as an idea or framework to view dynamic processes in zones of contact and exchange in a post-Cold-War Asia. At times, however, the chapters do not seem to come together as a cohesive whole. While the editors specify that the book does not attempt to 'formulate a general theory of neighbouring' (p. 28), it leaves the reader wishing for a more elaborate discussion of this promising concept.

References

- Scott, James. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Singh, Bhargupati. 2011. 'Agonistic intimacy and moral aspiration in popular Hinduism: A study in the political theology of the neighbour'. *American Ethnologist* 38 (3): 430-450.

Himani Upadhyaya is pursuing a PhD in History at Ashoka University, India. Her research examines mapping and surveying as sites of production of knowledge about the Himalayas in the nineteenth century CE.

himani.upd@gmail.com

