

China's borderlands in the post-globalization era

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China Information
2022, Vol. 36(3) 309–317

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DOI: 10.1177/0920203X221127224

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China is considered to be the biggest beneficiary of globalization, as evidenced by the growing volume and diversity of people, goods, and information moving across its borders. However, the increase in scholarly attention on China's borderlands that is warranted by such economic, social, and political activities is absent. This special issue of *China Information* is committed to new research that addresses mounting challenges facing studies on China's borderlands, as well as borderland studies in general. This special issue presents the work of emerging scholars who investigate cross-border migration and the key characteristics of China's borderlands, focusing on previously understudied places that were out of the reach of scholars for years. These studies offer a lens through which the socio-economic and politico-institutional changes in China's borderlands can be understood within the broader context of China's time-compressed global rise. A cursory glance at the research topics may give the impression that this special issue appears to investigate migratory phenomena in geographically remote places on the peripheries of the country. However, we suggest that China's rise is inseparable from, and critical to, a variety of complex phenomena that should be scrutinized and re-evaluated respectively in each contribution to this special issue. As areas experiencing rapid changes, China's borderlands are the sites of a multitude of processes embedded in the social transformation which affects the country's borderlands as much as its coastal regions.

We begin this Introduction by reviewing new trends in global studies on China's borderlands and we explore how meetings between Chinese and global scholars in this field lead to re-examination, confusion, and controversy because borderland studies are undergoing a recalibration in China. We introduce a set of five research articles which integrate different, but not necessarily conflicting, perspectives on China's borderlands. We propose research and policy directions for a post-globalized world gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic and China's rapidly evolving border management regimes.

This special issue aims to shed new light on our understanding of China's borderlands in the era of post-globalization, the rise of China, and the emerging significance of borderlands in regional, national, and local politics and economies. More importantly, we try

to bridge various fields of China's borderland studies and to facilitate various conversations.

New directions at China's post-globalization borders

As China looks beyond its borders, it is emerging as a game changer and a geopolitical power through its infrastructure engagements with the rest of Asia.¹ Just months ago at the time of writing, the China–Laos high-speed trans-border railway inaugurated a new era in China's design for Southeast Asia, transforming Laos from a landlocked country to a land-linked hub.² Across the borders, China is steadily laying the tracks for a new regional order and making its borderlands 'one of the most rapidly changing and interconnected spaces in the world'.³ The image of a trans-border railway conveys friendliness, collaboration, and more importantly, confidence. The vast difference between varied designs of borderlands marks a potential turn in borderland studies and places China-based insights at the forefront to greatly advance border theory and knowledge.⁴

China's borderlands have been progressively moving towards a central role in many macro-level strategies, as indicated in the Great Western Development and the Belt and Road Initiatives.⁵ These national efforts institutionalize sustainable frameworks for cooperation and exchanges mediated by local and regional interests.⁶ The emergence of China's borderlands in national, and even international, politics offers us an opportunity to examine the complex and rapid economic, political, cultural, societal, and security processes over the last two decades.⁷ It is thus unsurprising that borderland studies are undergoing a systematic recalibration away from static and orthodox territorial border thinking.⁸ As 'the most challenging terrain for human expansion and development',⁹ China's borderlands currently represent 'a mobile, a-territorial, and multi-scalar human and natural imaginary' and an evolving space 'for exploring the emerging post-humanistic and post-globalization border'¹⁰ in the 21st century.

Such recalibration is best represented in Bin Yang's *Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE to Twentieth Century CE)*, a revision of the understanding of Yunnan history from a mere multi-ethnic frontier of the Central Kingdom to an economic, political, and cultural centre buffeted simultaneously by imperial China, Tibetan regimes, and kingdoms of South and Southeast Asia.¹¹ The recalibration further leads to a re-examination of China's contemporary borderlands, from 'remote peripheries at the edge of nation-states' to a conceptualization of 'crucial junctures that hinge a considerable part of Asia together' and 'a vantage point to . . . understand the dynamic and ongoing reconfiguration of post-Cold War Asia' in new ways.¹² Previously, the 14 neighbours across 22,000 km of land borders were out of the sight of scholars, but significant shifts in China's everyday relations with bordering nations are now evident in an interconnected manner.¹³

Such everyday intercourses along the margins of a rising power can be better captured through a mix of historical and empirical methods against the backdrop of shared experiences of people from different nation states.¹⁴ However, although only a handful of anthropological inquiries have been made, they discuss quite a number of topics, such as relation-making experiences and politics, energy development, indigenous people, and remigration.¹⁵ While many pressing topics are left unexplored, the existing research,

supposed to transcend methodological nationalism, remains very centred on respective nation states on which these studies focus.¹⁶ Although borderlands are understood as ‘a geographical reality of living in proximity’,¹⁷ and ‘a flexible construction of social relations that can be stretched across time, space, and distance’,¹⁸ borderland studies in general are highly fragmented and each country’s scholarship, including Chinese scholarship, is isolated from one another to some degree. China’s nationwide lockdown during the pandemic further restricted academic exchanges since Chinese scholars cannot leave China easily for overseas fieldwork and foreign scholars cannot gain access to China’s borderlands at all. In contrast to mainstream ideas of centring the periphery, China’s borderlands are undergoing securitization at an accelerated pace and turning into sites of confrontation and surveillance.

This special issue at a glance

Geographically speaking, the articles of this special issue of *China Information* cover three border areas which are important to China, namely, in the west with Kazakhstan, a new neighbour and former constituent republic of the Soviet Union; in the east with North Korea, an old friend whose relationship with China was forged in the Korean



Figure 1. The investigated field sites.

Source: Original map from the Standard Map Service System of the Ministry of Natural Resources of the People’s Republic of China, <http://bzdt.ch.mnr.gov.cn/browse.html?picId=%224o28b0625501ad13015501ad2bfc0265>, accessed 18 July 2022. We inserted the numbers to indicate the research sites.

War; and in the south with Vietnam and Myanmar, both scarred by protracted civil wars (see Figure 1). Aiming for a clearer picture of the simultaneous, multi-directional, and voluminous migratory flows between China and its neighbours, we select two articles which discuss two Chinese ethnic minorities – Kazakhs and Koreans – who leave for their motherland, and two articles which focus on incoming migrants from elsewhere. In addition, we put forward a contribution that investigates China's engagement in regional frameworks on cross-border issues, analysing the intertwined development of China's geopolitical rise and its internal administrative capacity.

Zhe Zhang and Sansar Tsakhirmaa's article is on the rationales behind individual ethnic Kazakh's decision to emigrate to Kazakhstan or stay in China amid Kazakhstan's 'ethnic repatriation programme' which started with the independence of Kazakhstan from a collapsing Soviet Union. Ethnic Kazakhs dwell in Xinjiang, or *new frontiers* in literal terms, a vast borderland contested by Russia, China, Mongolian tribes, Central Asian regimes, and ethnic rebel forces for centuries. As much as 10 per cent of the ethnic Kazakh population are estimated to participate in cross-border migration, which should be contextualized in the broader background of shifting geopolitics, especially with regard to Kazakhstan's sizable Russian-speaking population and China's Belt and Road Initiative; China's ethnopolitics between the Han majority and several ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, as well as Kazakhstan's ethnopolitics between incoming migrant Kazakhs and native-born Kazakhs; and lastly, the policies of both Kazakhstan and China regulating the ethnic Kazakhs living in this borderland. By using data collected from available multilingual policies and 32 in-depth interviews, Zhang and Tsakhirmaa analyse this complex migration from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Their study examines how and why an economically less developed country is able to attract a large number of China's ethnic Kazakhs who are concentrated in a historically contested borderland and officially considered indigenous, while highlighting the apparent ethnic homogeneity of Kazakhstan in demographic as well as geopolitical terms.

The findings show that Kazakhs' decision to migrate depends on macro-level political, socio-economic, and demographic conditions in both the country of origin and country of destination. Another finding is that the ability of an ethnic Kazakh to migrate depends on meso-level institutional constraints and opportunities. For example, a combination of a welcoming ethnic return migration policy in Kazakhstan and emigration-tolerant policies in China serve as opportunities. Zhang and Tsakhirmaa's research considers the temporal factor in determining the salience of various factors at different time periods. Socio-economically and environmentally based factors, such as social welfare benefits, social ties, perceptions of developmental prospects, were more salient during the 2000s. However, since the late 2000s, especially during the 2010s, politico-culturally based factors, which include ethnonationalism, Kazakh linguistic and cultural concerns, and educational opportunities, have become increasingly salient. Socio-economically based factors that might determine migration decisions were superseded during the second phase. One finding contradicts the stereotypical perception that migrants are motivated by the receiving country's economic promise. Instead, the study finds that individuals may still migrate for politico-cultural factors while being fully aware that the economy of their homeland offers more opportunities. This research also includes a

comparative perspective and investigates the rationales of ethnic Kazakhs who choose to remain.

Shiwei Chen's article on ethnic Koreans in China complements Zhang and Tsakhirmaa's research by focusing on the migration of another Chinese ethnic minority living in the north-eastern borderland with North Korea. In a similar fashion, Chen's article is contextualized within the background of the geopolitical changes between China and two Korean states on the peninsula, especially the creation of the bilateral relationship between China and South Korea despite China's friendship with North Korea forged in the Korean War, the widening gap in economic development between the three countries in the post-Cold War era, and the decline of northeastern China which used to be the most developed area as the result of continuous and extensive investments by a variety of regimes for nearly a century but which fell quickly behind in the reform era. Unlike the one-step migration that ethnic Kazakhs undertake in their migration to Kazakhstan, ethnic Koreans are involved in multi-step migration. Usually, they begin their migration by participating in China's domestic migration, the largest in the world, through which they accumulate sufficient financial and social capital for their international migration to South Korea. Drawing on the ethnographic data collected from a multi-sited fieldwork, Chen's article captures the multi-directional migratory flows connecting the rural and urban, China and the two Koreas, which have grown into overlapping migrant networks mediated by strengthening Korean ethnicity over the years. Bridging together theories of migration infrastructure and ethnic category, Chen develops an analytic framework of ethnicity-mediated migration infrastructure which explains how evolving state regulations and ebbs and flows of the diplomatic relationships between China and Korea at the macro level, humanitarian organizations, migrant networks, and intermediaries at the meso level, and family members and brokers at the micro level jointly organize and mediate mobilities. By re-examining the Korean Chinese mobility-ethnicity nexus, this study uncovers the processes that turn rural ethnic Koreans into a mobile population. The ethnicity of Koreans has been frequently invoked and enhanced for purposes of enabling and sustaining the migration from and to the rural borderland. In the migration process, ethnicity is shaped, reshaped, defined, and redefined, and is increasingly salient in how ethnic Koreans understand, interpret, and perform ethnicity in everyday life. Chen's study demonstrates how ethnicity defines mobility, and vice versa, how mobility redefines ethnicity. The outmigration of young and able-bodied ethnic Koreans from the northeastern borderland is increasingly seen as a national security issue as it is institutionalized and perpetuated. However, Chen's article contends that the salience of ethnicity is overemphasized by policymakers and overshadows the real and difficult economic issues. The author suggests that the policies to slow down or prevent outmigration mediated by ethnicity must reach beyond the dichotomous national and ethnic sentiment of ethnic Koreans and their shifting identities of being Koreans, Chinese, Koreans in China, and China's ethnic Koreans.

The two articles just discussed provide snapshots of contradictory facets of two of China's borderlands. In the northwest, many ethnic Kazakhs are willing to leave for an economically less developed country, while in the northeast, ethnic Koreans leave economically distressed hometowns amid the broader decline of China's rust-belt region. These types of migration have not been fully addressed in previous borderland and migration studies. As the *outmigration* of ethnic minorities takes place along the northern borders, the *immigration* of foreign nationals from neighbouring states is reshaping the

southern borderland, due to China's uneven economic development. Two articles investigate migrant labour issues between China and its two neighbours – Vietnam and Myanmar. Though many of these issues are micro-level issues, we have to consider the broad socio-economic and politico-institutional contexts which generate such issues in the first place. Cross-border labour migration is a labour market response to China's labour force shortage driven by its population crisis. The wage hike in China's manufacturing sector leads to the mass relocation of labour-intensive factories to areas with human resource advantages, such as the borderlands adjacent to countries with a labour surplus. Such relocation occurs along the southern borders because countries on the other borders either do not have sufficient population, for example Russia and Central Asian countries; or their borderlands are geographically unsuitable for relocation, for example Pakistan and the Himalayan countries; or countries have an unstable bilateral relationship with China, for example India. A common thread running through the two articles is labour migration along China's southern borderlands.

Tabitha Speelman's article explicitly brings the state back into the conversation. Speelman's study analyses how Chinese state actors resolve conflicting developmental and security concerns in labour migration management in the Guangxi–Vietnam borderland. Like previous studies, she found that China increasingly treats migration, especially irregular migration, as a national security concern instead of a developmental advantage. However, as the labour shortage worsens in the coastal areas, along with the increased desire for economic development in the borderland, local governments push forward an open-door policy for labour migration in some special economic zones and have implemented more lenient immigration policies. Based on fieldwork and policy research, Speelman's article discusses China's emerging policy response to immigration management, including temporary labour migration policy design and implementation. Analysing the development and early implementation of the labour immigration policy trial, Speelman's study finds that the balance between security and development is tilted towards the former. Like other temporary labour programmes around the world, the Guangxi policy trial was developed in response to irregular labour migration; but unlike the other similar programmes, the Guangxi programme was retooled in its adaptation to the Guangxi border context in a conservative manner. Therefore, Vietnamese workers fell victim to the political negotiation processes between different Chinese state actors and were subjected to extreme migrant temporariness resulting from a labour programme which was supposed to liberate the foreign labour force. Also, the securitization of the labour migration trial affected the pre-existing circular migration patterns, caused hiring problems for employers, and led to a stricter bifurcation between regular and irregular migrant workers.

The article by Yueping Wang, Tianlong You, and Tian Yang on labour migration focuses on the labour contractor regime which was created to recruit migrant workers from Myanmar for the local sugar cane cutting industry. Unlike the previous article that focuses on migrant workers, this study highlights labour contractors and their precarity, which is largely ignored in the existing literature. Building on the concepts of precarity and mixed embeddedness, this study finds that micro-level contractors use unreliable social networks to recruit migrant workers for highly seasonable jobs which provide a partial income that reinforces workers' hyper-precious lives. At the meso level,

recruitments occur in an unpredictable and uncontrollable labour market in the increasingly integrated regional economy of mainland Southeast Asia. Labour recruitment is constrained by gender, ethnic, and familial factors, and by the recruitment competition with neighbouring countries. At the macro level, labour contractors are caught in China's quick-evolving immigration management regime and uncertainties of politico-institutional factors in sending countries which result in labour market volatility. Wang, You, and Yang's study finds that labour contractors are responsible for an overwhelming and contradictory labour management disproportionate to contractors' incomes. However, their study also finds that both contractors and workers are resilient and that they adopt a variety of strategies to stabilize this transnational labour contractor regime, but mostly in the interests of two larger players who are behind the frontline contractors – sugar factories and sugar cane farmers. In the same fashion as with Zhang and Tsakhirmaa's research, Wang, You, and Yang's study places the labour recruitment of Myanmar workers within a much broader context and discusses not only China and Myanmar, but other mainland Southeast Asian countries. Also, the latter study supports Speelman's findings that the border management regime is increasingly incentivized to secure the border rather than to promote economic development; that policy trials are reduced significantly; and that local governments become very risk-averse when power is centralized.

Also using Yunnan as an example, Franziska Plümmer examines administrative capacity building in border management through China's participation in regional organizations with regard to the Greater Mekong Subregion. This study documents how China's administrative capacity and cooperation through border liaison mechanisms, from a norm perspective, are negotiated, adapted, and practised selectively in the different regional organizations which follow an approach seen as a challenge to China's notion of sovereign border management. Again, the tensions between local governments and the central government on border management are highlighted as power is increasingly centralized, and leeway – which used to be reserved for local governments – is restricted. Building on a mixed-method approach including fieldwork and policy and institutional analyses, Plümmer's article shows that while the Chinese government builds on regional cooperation with regard to security enforcement, it remains unwilling to allow norm adaptation in its border management, especially because local officials prioritize domestic policy directives from the central government over the transnational norm. Chinese authorities are increasingly withdrawing from integration projects which demand norm adaptation and their understanding of how the border liaison mechanism should work is also increasingly moving away from other member states in regional organizations. As this study indicates, China's withdrawal is not necessarily in the best interest of border provinces such as Yunnan which apparently needs more regional cooperation to fight non-traditional security issues, for example, human and drug trafficking.

Notes

We acknowledge the two-year institutional support offered by Yunnan University. Our alma mater, Arizona State University, provided assistance in the assembly of a panel for the annual meeting of the Association for Borderlands Studies, by virtue of which the idea for this special issue was initiated. Our special gratitude goes to all contributors of this special issue for their collaborative effort in revising their manuscripts in a timely manner. We highly appreciate Tak-Wing Ngo for

his support and guidance all the way to the completion of this project. We also appreciate *China Information's* anonymous reviewers whose constructive and thoughtful critiques greatly helped strengthen the articles in this special issue. Special thanks to Professor Ming He of Yunnan University for his insightful comments.

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