

Frontiers and Boundaries: Encounters on China's Margins

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The editors

Introduction

Ildikó Bellér-Hann and Zsombor Rajkai

As a considerable number of monograph titles, conference, workshop and symposium programmes indicate, studying borders, frontiers and boundaries is in vogue. Studying China from the perspective of its borders has also been enjoying certain popularity for quite some time.¹ So what is the justification for publishing another edited book about the frontiers and boundaries of China? There are several simple reasons. Research on related topics in numerous disciplines continues to be pursued and there is a need to provide a suitable platform for publishing new results. Even though publishing in peer-reviewed journals is necessarily a top priority for many scholars, the collective volume seems to have retained its attraction especially for articles which are held together by a shared geographical focus and related thematic approaches. Few would claim that enough has been said about China's borders in geographical, historical, anthropological and political terms. Refining the results of existing studies by way of using hitherto untapped archival resources, collecting new fieldwork materials, revisiting and taking a fresh look at existing data or opening up new areas of research, remain a constant desideratum. Such an enterprise simultaneously provides the opportunity for younger scholars to join ongoing academic debates and a joint platform for those who work from diverse disciplinary perspectives, often in the context of different national traditions (which in some cases may be less inductive to publishing in English).

Unlike many other edited volumes, this volume has not emerged from a workshop, seminar or conference panel; instead, it is the result of informal but intensive professional networking between scholars, younger and more senior, whose interests coincide, intersect or touch upon each other. The authors come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds: historians thus rub shoulders with archeologists, folklorists, anthropologists, art historians and regional specialists. In any case at least some of our contributors do not easily fit into disciplinary slots since they have consciously crossed these boundaries in the course of their careers. Thus, in terms of its authorship, the volume has overcome generational, disciplinary and institutional boundaries as well as the boundaries of distinct national scholarly traditions.

Political borders, borderlands and frontiers have long fascinated scholars both in the European and also in the Asian context. While nation states lend themselves to the study of the multiplicity of meanings constructed around political borders, boundaries drawn around and between communities below (and sometimes above) the national level also invite attention. National borders are typically described in terms of structuring space while most

¹ See Hay 1994, Di Cosmo & Wyatt 2003, Parham 2004, Perdue 2005, Crossley 2007, Lary 2007 and Diener & Hagen 2010.

other communal identities are constructed in more complex ways: ethnic, religious, professional or other social/interest groups are often comprehended in ways which go beyond or even defy spatial definitions. Invisible but nevertheless very real boundaries divide groups of people; men and women, adults and children, the old and the young, the insider and the outsider, as well as imagined spaces such as the public and the private spheres,² but these boundaries cross and intersect in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways. Individuals are thus simultaneously members of numerous interest groups and inherent and ascribed memberships may also change involuntarily, by choice or as a result of both. This classificatory power of boundaries also extends to concepts such as state, society, artistic styles and writing traditions, but constructing binary pairs inevitably entails a certain measure of simplification and reductionism. This can be avoided if our conceptualisation allows for the movement and redrawing of boundaries as well as for the possibility of perceiving them as dynamic and flexible entities which may change not only over time and space but also with a shift in perspectives; the binary pairs of state and society are sometimes imagined as opposing realms, for example when unpopular policies are imposed on large segments of the population, at others as inclusive, for example when the nation state mobilises national sentiments. Binary pairs have been scrutinised and challenged by scholars in different disciplines and in different regional contexts because of their inherent reductionism, but they continue to be employed as useful organising tools. We both continue with these traditions, but also depart from them since our point of departure is a very broad definition of boundaries conceptualised as a structuring principle around which new, interdisciplinary, comparative research into China's encounters with the world, real or imagined, can be built.

What spatial, i.e. geographical, administrative or political boundaries share with conceptual boundaries is that they constitute junctures of encounters where similarities and differences are acted out, where conventional categories and accepted classifications are called into question. They also create a stage where ties of belonging are shaped and reconfigured. Conceptualised in this very broad sense, boundaries may be seen as places where contacts of all sorts may emerge, ranging from peaceful interaction (commerce, intermarriage) to violent conflicts; historical experience tells us that the two do not necessarily exclude each other. Borders are also zones of encounters, where forms of inclusion and exclusion are acted out, foregrounded or backgrounded, contested, reconfigured and negotiated. Like "real" borders, conceptual boundaries are also places which simultaneously separate but also connect, hence the fashionable expression "fuzziness". The very act of separation may invest the places created through separation with characteristics which lose their meaning as soon as the boundary is eliminated. Boundaries also invite transgression which may be motivated by lived experiences and

2 The emergence of the concepts *public* and *private spheres* with their four main components – the *state*, *economy*, *(civil) society* and *family* – has its origins in an early scholarly interest in exploring the internal conditions of the modern nation-state. However, an extension of these concepts to peripheries, frontiers and boundaries, has a great deal of potential; it promises to reveal new aspects of interactions between the public and private – not only in modern times, but, despite the obvious differences in the structure and characters of the two spheres, also in pre-modern times. This analytical perspective may also serve as a tool for future research which aims to explore the nature of social and institutional practices both in Asia and Europe, preparing the ground for further comparisons.

memories or inspired by the imagination. Boundaries are liminal by definition and are therefore spaces where taboos are confirmed but also challenged; they may be drawn to divide two entities but the dichotomy often does not hold since boundaries may intersect with each other, and individuals may find themselves caught up in complex webs of multiple influences.

Our conceptualisation of boundaries and our research questions have been inspired and closely follow the anthropological insights elaborated by Wilson and Donnan.³ We agree that boundaries do not necessarily need to be conceptualised as lines, but as spaces which can be imagined and represented as frontier zones. Frontier zones can be studied in relation to the centre but they themselves can be turned into a centre and become the object of scrutiny, where exchange, mixing, contestation and negotiation take place.

Our title refers to those places and spaces which are situated on the real or conceptual margins of Imperial or of modern China; they include all those zones of encounters where forms of inclusion and exclusion have been acted out, sometimes stressed and foregrounded, at other times treated either as a cultural backwater to the political centre or as background to local events. The focus of our volume is the *encounters* themselves: we wish to explore whether recent research makes it at all possible to identify *patterns* in movements and exchanges across spatial and conceptual boundaries and if yes, to what extent are the patterns in these two domains comparable or are parts of a larger pattern. Another question to be explored is, to what extent zones of encounters are turned into frontiers, real or imagined, and under what conditions do they need to be clearly demarcated, and when not, what form does the fuzziness of such boundaries assume?

While several of the papers in this volume discuss political borders, we emphasise that our interests go beyond a study of these: we wish to work from the premise that the political and the cultural are not two distinct realms but are in practice interconnected and inextricably entangled. Therefore our focus is on conceptual and cultural boundaries which necessarily include political and legal boundaries but also go beyond these. In addition, we do not merely see boundaries as entities of equal rank: more often than not boundary construction, regardless whether it is drawn horizontally (e.g. administrative boundary between two regions, between two nation states), or vertically (e.g. between social classes), typically involves ranking. Thus, studying conscious or unconscious strategies of boundary drawing is intimately connected to studying the distribution of power as well as attempts to modify, change or subvert existing power relations. It is our aim to further encourage a research perspective which, while recognising the importance of boundaries as organising principles of social life, also shows their permeability and entanglement through emphasising the cultural embeddedness of the political, and the ensuing messiness of social life.

While we hope that the articles included in our volume will be an inspiration for continuing research, we are not challenging the major tenets put forward and elaborated in previous studies. Our volume represents more a continuation of previous works published on related subjects than a major departure from them. Such studies tend to be focused on a particular period of Chinese history, and even when the historical focus is broadly defined,

3 See Wilson & Donnan 1998.

it tends to revolve around the themes such as ethnicity or identity.⁴ Such themes naturally remain important in our volume, since boundaries, whether they are constructed or dismantled, strengthened or trespassed, always have implications for classification and for identity. In line with Di Cosmo and Wyatt's volume, our contributions are not connected through or held together by a unifying intellectual orientation. We pay attention to China's encounters with the outside world in order to grasp spatial and conceptual boundaries, whereby the two sometimes coincide. In addition to focusing on "external lines" i.e. political or national boundaries or cultural boundaries which demarcate China from the rest (Oláh, Peng), we are also interested in exploring some of the "internal lines" which slice up a frontier zone to sub-regions and we point to the complexities and messiness of social relations which may emerge here (Namsaraeva, Sugawara). Although less tangible and therefore often less visible than political frontiers, such internal boundaries impact upon delineating group identities, and membership in a certain group may automatically entail resorting to certain institutions, as Sugawara's article on legal pluralism in Xinjiang demonstrates. Although in the scholarly literature boundaries are often discussed as consciously created, and are referred to in conjunction with transitive verbs such as drawing, constructing, contesting, negotiating, transgressing, and overcoming, they may be created without the intention of individuals or groups: historians may develop new styles of historiography which overcome or obliterate older patterns in an effort to come to terms with alien rule (Light). In approaching various historical epochs, representatives may consciously cultivate particular scholarly traditions, without wishing to demarcate themselves from other styles of historiography (Rajkai). Here, intentional and unconscious boundary drawings intersect with each other. This is also the case when identity construction following regional lines emerges from the grassroots, but is recognised and consciously acted upon by individuals and even policy makers may become motivated by very different agendas (Bellér-Hann). Other case studies highlight situations when encounters result in the crossing of conceptual boundaries; when Buddhist or Buddhist-like expressions appear in the Chinese Manichaean Hymnscroll (Kósa), when Chinese architectural forms enter the architectural style of the Uighur Khaganate (Arden-Wong), or when Chinese characters are used by non-Chinese (Galambos).

Chronologically the papers span over a thousand years of Chinese history, starting with Uighur-Tang relations in the eighth century and finishing in contemporary Xinjiang and Transbaikalia in the twenty-first century, but no effort has been made to consistently cover all the important periods of Chinese history. Whenever the geographical focus is foregrounded, which is the case with most papers, the papers concentrate on border areas, perhaps with disproportionately more attention paid to the northern and northwestern frontiers (Arden-Wong, Bellér-Hann, Galambos, Kósa, Light, Namsaraeva, Sugawara) than to the southern borders (Oláh, Peng). Even Rajkai's contribution, which represents an exception in so far as it focuses on three national historiographical traditions, could be classified with this former group because the traditions discussed all focus on Sino-Central Asian relations in the fifteenth century.

None of the papers falls in the category of conventional, event-based political history and data collection. At the same time, the approaches to history represented in the chapters

4 See Crossley, Siu & Sutton 2007, Di Cosmo & Wyatt 2004 and Rossabi 2005.