

ASIAN BORDERLANDS



Alessandro Rippa

# Borderland Infrastructures

Trade, Development, and Control  
in Western China

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Asian Borderlands presents the latest research on borderlands in Asia as well as on the borderlands of Asia – the regions linking Asia with Africa, Europe and Oceania. Its approach is broad: it covers the entire range of the social sciences and humanities. The series explores the social, cultural, geographic, economic and historical dimensions of border-making by states, local communities and flows of goods, people and ideas. It considers territorial borderlands at various scales (national as well as supra- and sub-national) and in various forms (land borders, maritime borders), but also presents research on social borderlands resulting from border-making that may not be territorially fixed, for example linguistic or diasporic communities.

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Figure 1: The People's Republic of China (map by Michael Athanson)



Figure 2: The Xinjiang-Pakistan borderlands (map by Michael Athanson)





Figure 3: The Yunnan-Burma borderlands (map by Michael Athanson)

# Acknowledgements

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As I write these words in the autumn of 2019, however, I realise that I cannot thank those who deserve my gratitude the most. I cannot name my friends, interviewees, and acquaintances from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, without whom my research in the region would have been pointless. I owe my academic career and, indeed, the life I currently live, to their generosity. Yet, I cannot name any of them for fear of possible repercussions that they and their families might encounter in the current political climate in the People's Republic of China.

Therefore, I have decided not to mention any names, but rather to let this book be a tribute to the un-acknowledgeable. To those who have been disappeared. To those who live in fear for themselves and their loved ones.

May the future give you back some of the happiness that you deserve.





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# Introduction

After months of denials amidst growing international scrutiny and concern, in October 2018 Chinese authorities publicly admitted the existence of a system of prison camps in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). By that point, the camps, officially labelled as “re-education” facilities, had been exposed for several months in the international media. A number of scholars, based mostly in European and North American institutions, had uncovered the imprisonment of over a million people in Xinjiang through a combined analysis of satellite images, government websites, media reports, and long-term ethnographic engagement with local communities.

Following its admission of the existence of the camps, the propaganda machine of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) began to produce a variety of stunning – both in terms of number and content – justifications for their existence. As part of this defence against international criticism, China’s state-run news agency, Xinhua, released a lengthy interview with Shohrat Zakir, the Chairman of the XUAR, in which he expressed the Chinese government’s views on the subject. Following the predictable Chinese Communist Party (CCP) line, he placed the camps within the framework of China’s struggle against the “three evil forces” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, deemed responsible of undermining “the stable and peaceful order and the atmosphere of solidarity and progress of Xinjiang.” In order to fight terrorism and safeguard stability, Shohrat Zakir continued, “Xinjiang has launched a vocational education and training program according to the law.” Such programme is supposed to help ethnic minorities in Xinjiang to “improve their ability in commanding the country’s common language, acquiring legal knowledge and vocational skills, among others.” Shohrat Zakir then mapped out the Party’s vision for the future of Xinjiang, based on the transformation that this form of training will bring:

Next, Xinjiang will further implement the strategies and policies on the region, set by the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core, adhere to the people-centered philosophy of development, properly handle the relations between stability and development, and concentrate on the three major tasks: construction of the core zone of the Silk Road Economic Belt, the implementation of the rural vitalization strategy and the development of the tourism industry.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The full transcript in English is available at Xinhua (2018b). In the interview Xinjiang’s “re-education” facilities are described in optimistic terms: the cafeteria offers “nutritious free



Despite the propagandistic tone of the interview, what the Chairman of the XUAR laid bare is the connection between control and development that is at the core of CCP policies at China's borderlands. Xinjiang's prison camps, in this sense, cannot be seen as detached from their connections with the "three major tasks" that the Party has set for itself: the Belt and Road Initiative, modernisation of the countryside, and tourism development. This nexus is the main focus of this book. In particular, I show how the development of trans-border infrastructure, currently reflected in the ambitiousness and ambiguities of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), cannot be addressed independently of the CCP's broader aim to capture and control the Chinese borderlands and its people. According to the same logic, projects to "build a new socialist countryside" and to turn minority areas into tourist resources underscore an attempt to re-design the borderlands and the communities to which they are home according to a particular ideology. The aim, as Shohrat Zakir explicitly pointed out, is transformational: while borderland territories are secured through radical infrastructural interventions, ethnic minority subjects are re-defined according to the CCP vision of modernity. This book attends to both processes in the context of trans-border investment in infrastructure and trade. In so doing, it shows that, as investment has grown, small-scale traders have lost their strategic advantage and are now struggling to maintain their businesses. Concurrently, local ethnic minorities have become the target of radical resettlement projects, securitisation, tourism-related initiatives, and, in many cases, have become increasingly dependent on state subsidies. *Borderland Infrastructures* traces this uneven development over the past two decades, thus raising fundamental questions about the future of the Chinese borderlands and about China as a whole. How does infrastructure development affect cross-border livelihood in today's

diets"; the dormitories are equipped with all comforts, TVs, air conditioning, and a bathroom; and there are even sports venues for outdoor activities. The reality of what is happening in Xinjiang, however, is far from what Shohrat Zakir depicted. There is ample evidence that large numbers of Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Hui are held against their will and without trial, thus circumventing Chinese law itself. Instead of "vocational training," as Shohrat Zakir claimed, what is taking place inside the camps resembles rather a brainwashing exercise, as part of which detainees are forced to abandon their native language and religious beliefs – obliged to learn Mandarin Chinese and to study Chinese Communist Party doctrine. The facilities themselves resemble well-guarded jails, secured by walls, fences, and state-of-the-art surveillance systems. Several reports point to various torture methods routinely employed inside the camps, ranging from physical punishments to bright lights left on throughout the night in overcrowded rooms, with inmates unable to exercise or go outdoors for weeks at a time. On the subject of mass internment of Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, see Zenz (2018); *The Economist* (2018); Thum (2018); Bunin (2018); Brophy (2018).



China? What is the place and role of ethnic minorities in larger processes of development? How are newly envisioned forms of connectivity as part of the BRI agenda affecting pre-existing mobilities and forms of exchange?

The idea that economic development will generate more stable societies has long underpinned the CCP's approach towards its border regions. In particular, the under-development of these areas, combined with the presence of sizeable ethnic minorities with kinship connections beyond China's borders, has traditionally been seen by PRC authorities as a major security risk. In the case of Xinjiang, for instance, Becquelin (2004) argues that this particular insecurity led to highly centralised policies in which Beijing plays a more important role in internal regional affairs as compared to other parts of China.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have focused on ethnic policies and ethnic relations in the context of the CCP's consolidation of power in its peripheries. These have included important works on ethnic identification, cultural politics, representation and resistance, and development.<sup>3</sup> In showing how this nexus of development and security plays out across a number of transnational spaces, this book argues that processes of economic development – mainly implemented through infrastructure – along the Chinese borderlands are characterised by an active attempt to erase particular histories. Such processes encompass both the consolidation of CCP power in China's peripheries as well as the development of a geography of transnational connectivity through the BRI. Starting with the latter, I show how the imagined geography underpinning new Silk Road fantasies ignores pre-existing forms of mobility, exchange, and connectivity more generally. In this process, what I call proximity – the set of skills developed by cross-border communities to take advantage of their particular positionality – is jeopardised in an attempt to create legible conduits and transactions. The third part of this book engages with this particular outcome through the image of the corridor, one of the Belt and Road Initiative's main features. In its relations with ethnic minorities and minority regions, on the other hand, the CCP has embraced an approach that actively erases anything that departs from its own definition of minority history and culture. I define this selective, violent, and transformational approach as a “curational” intervention, drawing on the original meaning of the Latin word *curare*: “to heal.” Chinese authorities, I argue, by projecting backwardness upon minority subjects,

2 On Xinjiang's “autonomy” and CCP “insecurity” in its historical claims, see Bovingdon (2010); Khan (2018); and Leibold (2019).

3 See for instance, Schein (2000); Litzinger (2000); Gladney (1991, 2004); Bovingdon (2010); Yeh (2013); Fischer (2014).



cultures, and spaces, see their “civilizing” mission in the borderlands as a project with profound moral and ideological implications. Albeit framed within the language of economic development, then, curatorial interventions underpin a disciplinary – and not economic – objective. This, in turn, results in further marginalisation and dependency. The Xinjiang’s prison camps, with which I began this book, can be understood as an extreme outcome of this particular logic of curation and cannot be framed outside of China’s larger push for transnational connectivity as part of the BRI. As Shohrat Zakir remarked, and as I will show in this book, the construction of new Silk Roads and disciplinary measures to create – or “curate” – new minority subjects cannot be thought of as separate from one another.

The research upon which this book is based was conducted in the decade prior to the establishment of a prison camps system in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, the dynamics that I address help shed light on how we have come to this ultimate – and ultimately tragic – development. The story is not limited to Xinjiang; in fact, it characterises China’s Western borderlands, from Yunnan to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to Inner Mongolia. In order to demonstrate this and to make a broader argument about China’s development, I juxtapose the borderlands of Xinjiang and Yunnan as two specific case studies showing how marginalisation, control, and infrastructure development go hand in hand.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, I do not aim to gloss over important regional specificities, but rather to address a common mode of ruling – a form of governmentality, to follow Foucault – that is characteristic of China’s approach to its minority-populated borderlands.

## Researching the borderlands

I travelled for the first time to one of China’s border crossings in 2009. Standing at over 4600 metres, on the Khunjerab Pass, I walked through the imposing Chinese-built gate into Pakistan. Once across, I shook hands with a Pakistani border guard, who seemed to be inappropriately dressed for the brisk temperature and high altitude, took a picture in front of a border marker alongside a small group of Chinese tourists, and then walked back into

4 Both the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province, as territorial units, are recent creations. As this book is mostly concerned with the current situation at the borderlands of today’s PRC, for the sake of clarity and convenience I generally use the names “Xinjiang” and “Yunnan”, even though it might appear anachronistic or historically inaccurate in certain parts of the narrative.



China. Not two hours later I was in my hotel room in Tashkurgan, less than a day's drive from Kashgar along the Karakoram Highway (KKH). Following that first visit, the Karakoram Highway became the focus of my doctoral research, and the Khunjerab Pass a recurrent destination. Between 2012 and 2013, I spent twelve months between Xinjiang and northern Pakistan, meeting cross-border traders in crowded bazaars, drinking endless cups of tea during idle mornings in their shops, visiting their relatives, business partners, and friends. In Pakistan, I interviewed prominent members of the Kashgari community – a group of Uyghurs who had migrated from Xinjiang to Pakistan throughout the 20th century – and members of the Pakistan Army Corps of Engineers involved with the construction of the Karakoram Highway in the 1960s and 1970s. In China, I visited traders in Urumqi, Khotan, and even Yiwu – a trading city in Zhejiang province, only three hours by train from Shanghai, and home to a large contingent of Pakistani traders.

While I returned to Xinjiang for brief periods of research in 2016 and 2017, by 2015 most of my research had shifted to another location: the China-Burma borderlands in Western Yunnan province. Over another 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I worked closely with Chinese officials and traders in the border town of Tengchong and lived with a Drung family in the Dulong Valley. I travelled extensively along and across the border, as did many traders, local officials, employees of Chinese companies working on infrastructure projects in Burma, and informants who helped with my research.<sup>5</sup> On more than one occasion, we crossed it without the proper documents, yet nevertheless did so with the tacit consent of local authorities. These “permissive politics” (Zhang 2018) regarding cross-border mobility in Yunnan never ceased to surprise me, particularly when I counterposed them with the strictness of the border regime in Xinjiang. Yet, much of what I saw in Yunnan engendered productive connections with what I had experienced in Xinjiang: the ubiquity of Silk Road rhetoric, the push for transnational infrastructure projects aimed at re-designing the geography of cross-border mobility in the area, the marginalisation of local ethnic groups through development processes that were described in official rhetoric as beneficial to them.

Between 2009 and 2019, many of my informants became my friends. Our lives became intertwined in ways that would have been impossible to foresee. I still have regular conversations over Skype, or WeChat, even with

5 The military government changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. However, both names are still widely used both within and outside Burma/Myanmar. As this book spans a period of time going back to the late 19th century, I have decided to refer to the country consistently as Burma.



people I have not seen in years. Others, I have met in unexpected places: Beijing, Tokyo, Munich. As this research challenged the often perceived “boundedness” of fieldwork, the period of my research became impossible to define, extending into the present and further into the past. Thus, besides interviews and the personal engagements that can be understood under the broad methodological umbrella of what anthropologists call “ethnography,” my research also took unexpected, textual turns. In order to gain a historical perspective of ambitious plans of transnational connectivity, I spent time in the British Library and in the National Archives in London. In China, I was given access to private archives in Tengchong. This latter phase of research has informed many of the conversations I have had throughout years of engagement in ways that cannot be underestimated.

Throughout these years, my own position as a researcher has been a constant object of reflection and consideration, particularly in relation to the different groups of people I was engaging with. When it comes to researching cross-border ties, mobilities, and informal exchanges, access can be a fundamental problem. For instance, while conducting research in Xinjiang, I did my best *not* to interact with local officials. Given the impossibility of obtaining a research permit for what would have been considered too “sensitive (*mingan*)” a topic, I did my best to avoid any encounter that might have jeopardised my access to the field and, more importantly, endangered my informants. This meant remaining highly mobile, avoiding long stays in small places where the persistent presence of a foreigner would likely have attracted unwanted attention. So, for instance, I never spent more than two weeks in Tashkurgan, a small border town near the China-Pakistan border. Instead of staying put for a long stretch of fieldwork, as in the established anthropological tradition, I travelled to Tashkurgan frequently but only for short periods of time. A week, ten days, sometimes only one night to catch up with someone visiting from Pakistan. In Kashgar, on the other hand, where I spent longer stretches of fieldwork, I avoided staying with Uyghur families, even when I had the chance to do so. Instead, I preferred hotels and hostels, in which I could be mistaken for a foreign tourist. In Tengchong, conversely, a significant part of my relations engaged with, and were made through, local CCP officials. I visited their houses and conducted formal interviews in government offices around town, and joined them on official visits to the border and to the construction sites of ongoing projects related to trade with Burma. I engaged with wealthy businessmen and was given access to the development plans for a new Border Trade Zone. Through them, I met their Burmese counterparts in Myitkyina and Mandalay, as well as Chinese businessmen operative inside Burma.



This multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and itinerant (Schein 2000: 28) ethnographic experience presented both strengths and weaknesses. Concerning the latter, I did not experience the kind of deep, long-term, embedded access to a particular locale and community that has long characterised classical anthropological scholarship. On the other hand, I gained a multiplicity of perspectives on the same issues through interactions with actors that, I came to realise, were entangled in similar processes despite their apparent distance. By taking this particular approach, I was able to bring to the fore dynamics and connections that would have otherwise remained out of sight. Take, for instance, the connection between new projects of transnational connectivity now brought together under the BRI agenda, and processes of excluding local forms of trade across the borderlands that forms the backbone of the first part of this book. Or, as the second part shows, the ways in which radical resettlement projects motivated by ecological, developmental, and tourist reasons are inherently designed to create new forms of minority subjectivity. And lastly, the intimate connection between development and control in 21st-century China, which I highlight by putting Xinjiang's prison camps in conversation with the opening of a Border Trade Zone in Yunnan's Tengchong. These arguments, and the ethnographic research that informs them, would have not emerged in such clarity if it were not for my ability to travel along and across the Chinese borderlands, engaging with groups of people as diverse as Tengchong officials, Uyghur migrants in Pakistan, car parts dealers in Urumqi, and Burmese intellectuals in Mandalay.

The overarching aim of this book is to highlight some of the key dynamics that define life at the borderlands of China. Thus, to account for the interconnections of local histories, national development agendas, personal interests, and perceived foreign security threats that define how people live across the Chinese borderlands today. I do so through a "rush of stories" (Tsing 2015: 37) – describing brief, and at times repeated, encounters with a small number of traders, officials, and migrants. Such examples are idiosyncratic – they refer to specific personal stories and places. Yet, they are also not entirely exceptional. Rather, they are representative of larger processes within which the Chinese borderlands are embedded. My selection of such stories is therefore not fortuitous. It rather points to the ways in which ethnography can be used to address, untangle, and interpret current dynamics of global impact and scale.

The issue of China's integration and administration of peripheral and multi-ethnic region has been examined by several excellent studies in recent years (cf. Bovingdon 2010; Yeh 2013; Fischer 2014; Lary 2007; Ma and Liu 1998; Ma 2000; Clarke and Smith 2016; Blum and Jensen 2002). Less attention has



been devoted to the Chinese borderlands as particular zones of friction, encounter, and (dis)connection.<sup>6</sup> This study, on the other hand, focuses on the areas along and across China's western borders as particular zones from which to examine the material manifestations of state territoriality, the evolution of China's ideas of development and connectivity, and the relations between the two. Border residents, as well as those who cross such national borders on a regular basis, deal with the "nation state" as a concrete reality, rather than as a line on a map or a set of mental images (Anderson 1991; Bhabha 1990; Gellner 1983; Chatterjee 1986; Thongchai 1994). As such, the book follows Veena Das and Deborah Poole's (2004) call for anthropology to look at marginal places and practices in order to gain a robust understanding of the state. Through such margins, I look at how state power is experienced, mediated, and enacted across China's borderlands today, and raise a number of crucial questions. What does the integration of the borderlands through infrastructural interventions mean for those who live along and across such borderlands? How does the seemingly paradoxical approach of extending a homogenising vision of development into the borderlands while branding difference for tourist consumption affect peripheral spaces? What does the borderlands' renewed "centrality," particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, mean for local livelihood and long-term cross-border relations? And finally, what do China's attempts to monitor and control overseas minority communities tell us about the extension of CCP power in the 21st century?

### **China's western borderlands from the Open Up the West Campaign to the Belt and Road Initiative**

In 1911, Archibald Rose, then British consul in Tengchong, a border town in western Yunnan province, submitted a report on the "Chinese Frontiers of India." The chronicle, based on years of service in Sichuan and Yunnan and on a journey to Central Asia through India and Kashmir, the Pamirs, and what at the time was known as "Chinese and Russian Turkestan," was later published in *The Geographical Journal* (1912). A short memorandum attached to the original report, however, remained confidential.<sup>7</sup> In it, Archibald Rose proposed an exchange of territory to overcome an impasse in negotiations

6 Notable exceptions include Parham (2017); Evans, Hutton, and Eng (2000); Saxer and Zhang (2016).

7 The report is now available at the British library archive: IOR/L/PS/11/6.



over the demarcation of a section of the border between China and British Burma, and to prevent major Russian interference in today's Xinjiang. According to his proposal, the British would make a concession over Pianma (or Hsipaw), a piece of territory west of the Gaoligong Mountains, at the China-Burma frontier, which both the Chinese and the British claimed as their own.<sup>8</sup> In exchange, the British would take advantage of the small state of Hunza's claims over Sariqol, a high-altitude valley in the Pamir mountains today at the border between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The aim was to bring under British control a strategic portion of territory that, Rose feared, the Russians were eyeing in order to expand their reach eastward, into southern Xinjiang. Henry McMahon, the recipient of Rose's report, did not take his proposal seriously.<sup>9</sup> China never fully settled its border issues with the British, and Rose's proposal, connecting two remote regions at the extremes of the Tibetan plateau, was buried at the India Office.

The two border areas discussed by Rose, between China and the now independent states of Burma and Pakistan, represent the main focus of this book. What is of interest to me, however, is not so much a discussion of the territorial limits of each state's jurisdiction, but rather to understand how such power is deployed and experienced. China and Burma, to be sure, settled their border dispute already in 1960. China and Pakistan did the same in 1963.<sup>10</sup> Both settlements, while putting an end to decades of negotiations, stand-offs, and disputes, represent critical starting points in the affirmation of particular forms of state power in the borderlands. In his report, Archibald Rose describes China's historically troublesome relation with its frontiers and details how precarious its control over large sections of today's Xinjiang and Yunnan was. In the century following Rose's journeys, the borderlands of China were securely brought into the embrace of the Chinese Communist Party, its "frontier tribes" categorised into a system of minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*), and border areas made accessible to security forces, but also businesses and, more recently,

8 On Pianma and the "Pianma incident" following a British mission to seize Pianma in 1910, see McGrath (2003).

9 McMahon, in his role as foreign secretary of British India, later negotiated a boundary line with the Tibetan Government (known as the McMahon Line) at the 1914 Simla Convention (to which Archibald Rose took part). The line defines the boundary of Tibet and British India between Bhutan and what is today Burma. The line, however, was never agreed upon by the Chinese, and it is to this day contested and the site of conflict between India and China.

10 This agreement has not been recognised by India, which still claims sovereignty over portions of territory administered by Pakistan and China. See the seminal work of Alistair Lamb (1964, 1968, 1973).

tourists. An old Chinese saying on the peripheries of the empire notoriously states that “the mountains are high and the emperor far away” – referring to the traditionally unruly and relatively out-of-reach frontier regions. After seven decades of communist rule, the saying no longer holds true. The borderlands have been brought into the sphere of direct control of the state for the first time in China’s history, and they are now integral parts of the national geo-body.<sup>11</sup> They remain, nevertheless, particular places from which to observe how processes of inclusion and territorialisation take place. In particular, this book focuses on the latter phase of what, echoing James Scott (more below), could be termed the “last enclosure” of the frontier – a process that materialises mostly through infrastructure development since the turn of the millennium. To understand how this process unfolded, it is important to briefly detail the history of China’s borderlands since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, in 1949.

A fundamentally anti-imperialist force, the CCP unsurprisingly sought to restore what it considered China’s territorial integrity following the establishment of the PRC. Such efforts need to be understood against the backdrop of China’s late imperial and Republican history, in which foreign powers, particularly the British, Russian, and Japanese empires conquered and administered sections of Qing territory through open acts of aggression and “unequal treaties” (*bu pingdeng tiaoyue*) imposed upon the weak Chinese state. Following the so-called century of national humiliation (*bainian guochi*), CCP leaders thus made it their priority to restore the country’s prestige. When the PRC was established in 1949, its leaders identified the borders of the newly formed communist state to coincide with the territory recognised to be Qing lands at the point of the empire’s collapse in 1911. The challenge, to put it in the words of Benedict Anderson, was to stretch “the short, tight skin of a nation over the gigantic body of the empire” (1991: 86). Significantly, this territory included most of the late Qing’s ethnic frontier, including parts of Xinjiang and Yunnan, which the Qing managed only intermittently, and for the most part indirectly.<sup>12</sup> Thus, while such claims allowed CCP leaders to successfully inscribe the PRC into an imagined imperial geography going back thousands of years, the legacy of the Qing

11 In borrowing Thongchai (1994) famous expression, I understand the notion of geo-body as a *process* as much as a *product*. For a discussion of the issue of China’s geo-body vis-à-vis Thongchai’s work, see Klingberg (2017). See also Duara (1995) and Fiskesjö (2006).

12 On the Qing’s administration of Yunnan, see Giersch (2006). On Xinjiang, see Millward (1998; 2007); Kinzley (2018); Perdue (2005).



frontier presented several challenges for them.<sup>13</sup> Two in particular are of interest here: the incorporation and management of an ethnically diverse, vast, underdeveloped, and sparsely populated periphery,<sup>14</sup> and a number of territorial disputes with post-colonial nations such as India, Pakistan, and Burma.<sup>15</sup>

The Party's territorial objectives and anxieties materialised through particular development efforts and institutions across the country's most peripheral areas. Such processes were not uniform across China's diverse borderlands and vis-à-vis distinct neighbours. In Xinjiang, the initial task of asserting CCP control and overseeing the creation of a new administrative organ was led by the People's Liberation Army. To this end, Xinjiang saw the creation of a "peculiar institution" (Millward 2007: 251), the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, generally known as *bingtuan*.<sup>16</sup> Designed to combine production with militia duties, the *bingtuan* were enshrined with the task of securing the borderlands and opening up Xinjiang's "wilderness" for agriculture and resource extraction. As such, the *bingtuan* played a major role in the settlement of China's western frontier and the integration of Xinjiang. As Tom Cliff put it: "the frontier can be seen as having moved beyond places where *bingtuan* farms have created a frontier of settlement in the past. The *bingtuan* and the frontier move in close alignment, the latter being swept along by the former" (Cliff 2009: 91). The situation was different in Yunnan, which, by 1949, was better integrated within the Chinese

13 China's approach to territorial issues and the production of a particular national geo-body by CCP authorities have been the object several studies. See in particular Callahan (2009) and Leibold (2006, 2007).

14 Many scholars have raised the question of what the construction of a Chinese nation meant for those who were "less authentic, more peripheral, and farther removed from a core Chinese tradition" (Gladney 1998: 5), thus expressing concerns about the role of ethnic minorities in China's contemporary nationhood (cf. Litzinger 2000; Schein 2000; Bulag 2002; Bovingdon 2010; Lipman 1997; Rossabi 2004). Importantly, this work explored the ways that China's ethnic populations have been territorialized in a Han national geography, not only as subjects of a hegemonic national vision, but also as knowledge-making groups that have affected that national conception.

15 On China's territorial disputes, see Fravel (2008).

16 *Bingtuan* is a short form for *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan*, which is usually translated in English as Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. The Corps system has its predecessor in the military-agricultural colonies of Han China, called *tuntian*, where it was employed to sustain troops and enhance control over the frontier. Established in 1954, today's *bingtuan* are a semi-military government organisation that "assumes the duties of cultivating and guarding the frontier areas entrusted to it by the state" (State Council of the PRC 2003). Subordinate to the leadership of the central government, the Corps operate schools, hospitals, courts, militia, and produce about one sixth of Xinjiang's GDP. On the *bingtuan*, see Cliff (2016)

administrative system, particularly due to its importance for the Nationalist government's "great rear base" (*dahoufang*) strategy and the province's crucial role during World War Two. Economically, too, some urban areas in Yunnan had become an important base for industrial relocation following Japanese invasions of much of the country's coastal and northern provinces (Summers 2013: 45). The Yunnan borderlands too, however, presented a key security challenge to early communist rule. Following the end of the civil war, a number of Nationalist (*Guomindang*, henceforth KMT) troops fled to northern Burma. There, with the support of Taiwan and (most likely) the CIA, they attempted a number of forays into Yunnan in the early 1950s, without success (Gibson and Chen 2011).

During the first few decades of communist rule, both Xinjiang and Yunnan saw the implementation of a number of similar policies: land distribution,<sup>17</sup> state-sponsored Han migration to the region, and the creation of autonomous minority areas. Externally, however, in their relations with their neighbouring states, Xinjiang and Yunnan faced rather different challenges with tangible consequences for their border population. In Xinjiang, in particular, as part of the Sino-Soviet split, China and the Soviet Union increased border security through military presence and border infrastructure deemed to protect the nation's boundaries in case of an attack.<sup>18</sup> Vast areas along Xinjiang's western borders with present-day Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were turned into a constellation of no man's lands, an empty (or indeed, emptied) cushion between the two rivals. In Yunnan, on the other hand, while cross-border ties were not formally encouraged, small-scale trade and a fair amount of cross-border mobility remained major characteristics of the border areas. Furthermore, in 1968, China facilitated and supported the Communist Party of Burma's (CPB) invasion of large sections of the northern borderlands of the country. In the subsequent two decades, men, weapons, and supplies flew across what had become an open border, between Yunnan and the "liberated areas" of northern Burma under CPB administration.

17 Land reform in Yunnan occurred in two distinct phases. In 1950, the province was divided into two areas, an inland zone and a frontier zone (*bianyanqu*). The frontier zone included areas mostly along Yunnan's international borders, where the native chieftain (*tusi*) system was still in place. While land reform in the inland zone was completed by 1952, it was postponed in the frontier zone in the wake of the *minzu* identification project (*minzu shibie*) and completed only in 1956. See Yang (1972: 253–4).

18 Chinese deployment of military forces in Xinjiang was modest compared to that of the Soviet Union. As Shichor (2004) argues, the PLA viewed Xinjiang as "strategic depth" that would slow down a Soviet attack, rather than a vital piece of national territory to be defended at all costs. This, according to Millward (2007: 295–8), might be one reason for Xinjiang's relatively "late" development.



Ma Dazheng, one of China's most prominent scholars of borderlands and frontier issues, remarked that China's peripheries are, simultaneously, frontlines of national defence and key places for today's open-door policy. "Prior to the 1980s," he elaborated, "the frontier served only in the first capacity; since then in both" (Ma and Shan 2012: 68). This statement is only partially true for Xinjiang and Yunnan. While, as this book highlights, the particular duality between openness and closure is a main facet of today's borderlands, for Xinjiang and Yunnan the 1990s were significantly more eventful than the beginning of the reform period in the 1980s. The borderlands of Xinjiang, in particular, did not witness any major shift until the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, and the consequent formation of Central Asian states.<sup>19</sup> In Yunnan, on the other hand, the borderlands were largely caught in the Cold War rivalry between communist and Burmese army forces until the implosion of the CPB in 1989. In both cases, it was only in the early 1990s that the promises of mobility, trade, and investment embedded in Deng Xiaoping's reforms took concrete shape.

By then, China's western provinces were markedly poorer and less developed than the rest of the country.<sup>20</sup> To counter this gap, in 1994 the Chinese government launched a first major poverty alleviation campaign (the "8-7 strategy"), which ended up focusing primarily on China's central and western regions. As part of it, subsidies in the forms of loans and grants were distributed to poor counties for a total of US\$ 13.6 billion, or 5-6 per cent of total government expenditures.<sup>21</sup> Poverty alleviation campaigns were followed by strategies explicitly targeting the western regions, particularly in the ninth five-year plan (1996-2000) and, notoriously, with the launch of the "Open Up the West Campaign" (*xibu da kaifa*) in 1999 in conjunction

19 As James Millward puts it, "Xinjiang had been relegated to a status of strategic buffer zone and economic cul-de-sac since the rise of Sino-Soviet tensions in the late 1950s and 1960s. In the new international context [that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union] Chinese leaders moved simultaneously both to open the region as a conduit to the rest of Eurasia and to integrate it more tightly with the rest of China" (2007: 289).

20 Already in the course of a visit to Tibet in 1980, Hu Yaobang, the CCP General Secretary, called for major reforms in minority areas. Deng Xiaoping himself, during a visit to Xinjiang the following year, stressed the importance of raising the standards of living in frontier regions. Both calls, however, must be understood within the broader objective of curbing separatism through development, which would become a major feature of China's borderland policies in the post-reform era. Deng's remarks, in particular, were explicitly referring to this fundamental aspect of China's policies in minority regions (see Millward 2007: 278-9). For an overview of China's security concerns in Xinjiang in the 1990s, see Becquelin (2000).

21 Wang, Li, and Ren (2004). On the role of subsidies in China's development of its western regions, see Millward (2000); Fischer (2015).





with the tenth five-year plan. The *xibu da kaifa* represents a significant turning point in the CCP's efforts to develop its western borderlands, not least because of the discursive attention that it projected on China's least developed, minority populated, and resource-rich frontiers. The motivations behind the programme were conspicuous. After twenty years of economic reforms, the gap between fast-growing coastal areas and poor and under-connected internal provinces was widening.<sup>22</sup> In practice, as part of the *xibu da kaifa*, most investments were initially dedicated to developing transportation, energy, communication, and improving urban infrastructure in the western regions. Some large-scale projects stood out, such as the Qinghai-Tibet railway and the West-East natural gas transfer project, for a cumulative investment on infrastructure of one trillion RMB between 2000 and 2005.<sup>23</sup>

The *xibu da kaifa* was also characterised by a security component whose ideological roots can be found in the so-called "security-development nexus", i.e. the expectation that economic development will reduce insecurity in states and societies (cf. Duffield 2001). Border region underdevelopment, combined with the presence of sizeable ethnic minorities, has been viewed as a security risk since the inception of the PRC. Hence, state-led development agendas, like the *xibu da kaifa*, sought to pacify social unrest by encouraging local governments to boost economic growth through developing trans-boundary economic ties.<sup>24</sup>

The spate and scale of investment further accelerated in 2008 when, in order to cope with the negative impact of the global financial crisis on the Chinese economy, the central government announced a fiscal stimulus programme of four trillion RMB. The largest share of the stimulus package went into infrastructure projects, including public utilities and affordable housing in rural areas (Schüller and Schüller-Zhou 2009: 169). While not only focused on western provinces, this new stream of financial transfers, combined with ongoing development projects initiated as part of the *xibu*

22 As Jiang Zemin put it in March 1999 at the Ninth National Party Congress in Beijing: "The Western area is large, and comprises over the half of the whole of the state's territory. But the majority is in a state of underdevelopment or wilderness. The West [of China] must sooner or later be developed. Otherwise, how could we reach a modernization of the whole country? How could China become a strong economic state?" (Yan 2001: 1).

23 Démurger (2014). On the *xibu da kaifa*, see also Holbig (2004).

24 Jiang Zemin himself made this connection clear in 1999: "The minorities are quite concentrated in the West [of China], and it is also a border area. Hastening development of the West would preserve political and social stability. Therefore, promotion of national unity and safeguarding of border security is of great significance" (Yan 2001: 2). See also Clarke (2008).

*da kaifa*, led to major constructions across the Chinese borderlands, from Xinjiang to Yunnan, the TAR to Inner Mongolia.

It is argued in this book that through such explicit forms of “giving” (Yeh 2013), the Chinese state discursively re-positioned its western borderlands from under-developed backwaters to spearheads of investments and connectivity. Consequently, although principally focused on internal development, the *xibu da kaifa* reverberated beyond China’s borders and led to a number of initiatives aimed at enhancing cooperation between China and its border nations. In Yunnan, plans to connect China with India, Bangladesh, and Burma through a network of state-of-the-art infrastructure were drafted at a high-profile meeting at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences in August 1999. In Western China, similar efforts culminated in 2001 with the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In the “Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” that resulted from the founding meeting of the group, the main focus was on the strategic value of the SCO and its implications for regional security. However, a general call for “multilateral cooperation” and “trade and investment facilitation” between the member states was also included.<sup>25</sup>

This discursive shift, in which the borderlands had become embedded in China’s broader mission to open-up, is particularly evident if we consider the coincidence of the Open Up the West campaign with the “Going Out” strategy (*zouchuqu zhanlüe*), also launched in 1999 to encourage Chinese investments abroad. As Yeh and Wharton have argued, the two overlapping strategies, while rarely considered together, “can shed light on Chinese development approaches” (2016: 288) due to their multi-faceted intersections. In particular, they identify the centrality of physical infrastructure as a key element of the country’s development trajectory both within its national boundaries as well as outside of them. “Whereas Western countries’ development programs have moved from modernization to a series of other approaches including basic needs, structural adjustment, and later a focus on governance and social goals,” they point out, “Chinese development has remained much more constant in its focus on assistance for infrastructure and production” (2016: 297).<sup>26</sup>

25 *People’s Daily* (2001); see also Ripa (2017).

26 According to Yeh and Wharton (2016), this form of development is also characterised by the imposition of specific “models” upon both frontier landscapes and foreign investments – be it the urbanisation of the countryside or the omnipresent Special Economic Zone. Such models, they argue, are not fixed, rather lending themselves to manoeuvring and accommodation, yet

If approached from within this perspective, China's latest — and most ambitious — global campaign, the Belt and Road Initiative, is sticking for its remarkable continuity with China's approach to development over the past two decades. Not unlike the *xibu da kaifa* and the Going Out strategy, the BRI "largely consolidates and elevates already existing ideas and practices" (Yeh and Wharton 2016: 308), although re-packaged and re-branded into a major foreign policy priority. Whilst such acts of branding should not be underestimated for the discursive power that they hold and produce, the BRI needs to be understood within this particular history. In this book, I approach the BRI as the *culmination* of a particular development trajectory, rather than as a stand-alone, brand-new strategy. As such, it is useful to take some of the effects of the *xibu da kaifa* as critical starting points to address BRI projects in Xinjiang and Yunnan. The *xibu da kaifa* initially did not succeed in the reduction of regional disparities between east and west, or in attracting foreign investment, despite the creation of a network of cross-border Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and ad hoc preferential policies. Indeed, subsidies and centre-to-province fiscal transfers were the main resources through which western development had been approached (Becquelin 2004; Fischer 2015; Grewal and Ahmed 2011, Yeh and Wharton 2016). What the *xibu da kaifa* did succeed in, however, was a number of unstated goals, namely resource extraction (Oakes 2004), rent distribution (Shih 2004), and the consolidation of state power in the peripheries (Goodman 2004; Yeh 2013) through an increased Chinese in-migration in minority areas and the selective distribution of resources (Becquelin 2004; Jeong 2015). These, in turn, resulted in increasing discontent among ethnic minorities, fuelling unrest in a number of border regions (cf. Fischer 2014; Bovington 2010).

Building upon this research, this book brings to the fore another effect of two decades of large-scale investment in infrastructure development in the borderlands: the marginalisation of local forms of cross-border trade as a result of increased control. In particular, by focusing on the borderlands of Xinjiang and Yunnan, I show how the changing infrastructural landscape led to a re-configuration of cross-border mobilities and minority subjectivities, as well as to new forms of regulations and technologies of surveillance. These, in turn, curbed the quantity and quality of pre-existing forms of transnational connectivity, displaced — both physically and culturally — ethnic minorities, and ushered in new forms of exclusion amidst trading communities.

they drive policies and investment across the Chinese borderlands and beyond, as I detail in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book.



## From refuge to the infrastructure frontier: Perspectives on (China's) borderlands

There are a number of words in English that refer to the edges of a nation state, with scholarly discussions often distinguishing between frontier, borders, and borderlands, among others.<sup>27</sup> As Stéphane Gros (2016: 15) notices, in the East Asian context, “frontier” evokes two prominent figures that have written on the topic: Owen Lattimore and Edmund Leach. In his *Inner Asian frontiers of China* (1940), Lattimore makes the case for understanding the frontier as a dynamic zone through which cultures meet, move, merge, and collide. In *Frontiers of Burma* (1960), on the other hand, Leach discusses the inapplicability of the concepts of frontier, state, and nation as defined by contemporary political geography and essentially based on the “dogma of sovereignty” underpinning the nation state. Conceived of together, these two works reveal a conception of the frontiers as peculiar zones in which boundaries are inherently unstable, and the geography of the nation state rarely corresponds to that expressed by indigenous notions and political systems. Such seminal works also speak to a more current debate in the social sciences in which the notion of frontier has been revived in order to capture and understand a range of developmental processes at the intersection of resource extraction, state-making, and different forms of social power (Moore 2000; De Angelis 2004; Watts 2014, 2015). Within this literature, the frontier is generally regarded as a “relational space” (Barney 2009), which is to say a space actively produced through the interactions of different actors and institutions. Frontiers, in other words, are understood as mobile spaces – a “permanent prospect” (Watts 2014: 193) – that create the ecological, social, and political conditions for hyperbolic forms of exploitation and accumulation. As Anna Tsing put it: “Frontiers are not just discovered at the edge; they are projects in making geographical and temporal experiences” (2003: 5100; see also Tsing 2005). Borders and borderlands, on the other hand, refer more directly to that most uncanny bequest of the modern nation state: the Westphalian border-as-line.<sup>28</sup> While we have become accustomed to the ways in which lines define national boundaries on maps, their physical presence is elusive at best. Border lines can hardly be found,

27 And perhaps more so between borderworlds (Sadan 2013) and border zones. There have also been attempts to identify a typology of borderlands, in particular, see Baud and Van Schendel (1997). See also Paasi (2014).

28 For an introduction to the vast body of literature on the subject, see Wilson and Donnan (1998; 2012). For a definition of these different terms, see also Baud and Van Schendel (1997).

identified, and followed. Despite a recent resurgence of border walls to materially claim – and allegedly “defend” – the edges of our nations (Jones 2012), their material presence does not seem to affect most citizens of such nations, if not in the spectacle of televised politics. National borders remain, in other words, a somewhat mysterious creation, yet one that maintains a fundamental social function.<sup>29</sup> In Chinese, *bianjiang* encompasses the definitions of both borderlands and frontiers. As such, the term indicates a liminal space of confluence and encounter, as well as the physical limit of the nation state. As a concept, it seems to acknowledge some of the key features of a borderland: a zone defined by the presence of a boundary yet extending well beyond the border-as-line that defines a nation state's claims to territorial sovereignty (Calanca and Wildt 2006; Lary 2007: 5–6; Wade 2000).

Scholarship in the social sciences has, in recent years, shown several attempts to reconcile the “temporal” dimension inherent to the notion of frontier with the more “spatial” approach underpinned by borders and borderlands in the study of the national edges of nation states. To do so, scholars have stressed the need to study the histories of particular borders, how they have come to be defined, enforced, and represented.<sup>30</sup> A particularly fruitful approach is that of seeing national borders as examples of more general processes of b/ordering – and in so doing, to analyse the *practices* surrounding borders and border-making rather than focus on borders as stable political entities (Paasi 1999; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002; Wilson and Donnan 2012: 17). In such a conceptualisation, borders are understood relationally, as a process – as Sarah Green (2012) put it, more a verb than a noun. Such approaches allow us to explore the complexity in both form and function of contemporary national borders, including their displacement and materialisation at places that, geographically at least, do not often coincide with the border-as-line drawn on maps.<sup>31</sup>

29 As Ishikawa puts it: “in theory the full sovereign power of the state extends to this imaginary line, and there it stops completely. In practice, the space around the border becomes a special field, a threshold that accommodates a series of social, economic and cultural flows from one national arena into another, a zone where things are no longer what they were, but not yet what they will be” (2010: 5).

30 Recent examples include Nick Megoran (2017) “biographical” approach and Madeleine Reeves’s focus on “border work” (2014) in Central Asia, Sarah Green’s (2005) work on marginality and gaps in the Balkans, and Franck Billé’s (2017) writing on the subject.

31 My understanding of and approach to the national boundaries of China that represent the core topic of this book, is deeply influenced by this latter body of literature. As such, the distinctions sketched above between border, borderland, and frontier, are not to be understood as fixed and rigid. Nevertheless, I use border when referring to the national boundary of the

In the context of China's – and Asia's, more broadly – borderlands, another approach to the study of frontier spaces has been particularly influential. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott put forward a bold argument claiming that the hills and mountains of upland Southeast Asia served as the last of a series of escape zones to which people moved to in order to avoid incorporation into oppressive agricultural states and empires. Accordingly, a significant part of highland population consisted of people who *had chosen* not to be part of a state. Groups such as the Naga of today's northeast India, or the Wa of the China-Burma borderlands, had acquired cultural inventories that were appropriate to this end: forms of agriculture compatible with frequent movement, the ability to shift between multiple ethnicities, non-hierarchical religious systems, and so forth. Scott's thesis of self-chosen refuge has been met with much criticism from scholars with experience in the area, pointing out numerous flaws and imprecisions in his rendering of historical highland life and politics.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Scott's work brought to the fore a crucial dynamic that has often been over-sighted: that highland communities are not the survivals of primordial cultural forms and bearers of timeless traditions, but are rather integral to larger processes of geopolitical transformation throughout history.<sup>33</sup>

Scott's thesis explicitly concerns pre-World War Two history. He argues that upland Southeast Asia as well as other escape zones have all by now effectively been incorporated into nation states, thanks in particular to what, echoing David Harvey (1989), he calls "distance-demolishing technologies" such as railroads, all-weather roads, and telephone networks. In the following decades this process all but expanded, in both scale and speed. In the Chinese context, the years following the turn of the millennium in particular have seen a frenzy of transportation infrastructure projects in the borderlands. Thousands of kilometres of roads and railways were built or upgraded – some of them meant to tie peripheries more closely into the nation state and secure its "core interests," others with the dedicated purpose of fostering border trade. Together with new roads came checkpoints, dry ports, and customs facilities, all of them accompanied by rhetoric of progress,

state, the physical edge of national territory. Borderlands, on the other hand, refer to the areas in proximity to such line. With frontier, on the other hand, I refer to two distinct notions. First, I use frontier when discussing pre-nation state borders – particularly in the context of border disputes in imperial times. Secondly, frontier refers to particular processes of accumulation as described above.

32 See for instance Jonsson (2014) and Sadan (2010).

33 For a discussion of Scott's thesis applicability to other contexts, see the Special Issue of the *Journal of Global History* edited by Jean Michaud (2010).

order, and security. Outside of China's borders, Chinese companies have contributed to numerous infrastructure projects in neighbouring countries, from Pakistan to Burma, and constructed thousands of kilometres of feeder roads penetrating ever deeper into the last remaining jungles of Southeast Asia to access resources and turn sleepy rural villages into investment opportunities for agribusinesses, logging, and mining. Moreover, plans for even bigger infrastructural projects are on the horizon, many of them in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (Callahan 2016; Johnson 2016; Sidaway and Woon 2017). Infrastructure – some promised, some built – has captured the minds and dreams of a vast portion of borderland residents across and along China's borders. The pace at which infrastructure developments are currently reshaping livelihoods, opportunities, and ambitions is staggering. However, as several anthropologists of infrastructure have noted, roads, corridors, and SEZs seldom live up to the promise of mobility and prosperity on which they are built or planned (Larkin 2013; Nyíri and Breidenbach 2008; Campbell 2010; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Harvey and Knox 2015; Rippa, Murton and Rest 2020). At times, they even end up becoming obstacles rather than conduits for development and connectivity (Walker 1999; Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012; Demenge 2013). In other words, roads and corridors do not always “demolish distance” – they rather create nodes of legibility and state presence, but in the process, they also increase the remoteness and illegibility of border areas outside their immediate scope (Saxer and Andersson 2019; Rippa 2019b).

This book represents a departure from Scott's narrow interpretation of upland areas as historical refuge in favour of a general reflection on state authority, development, and infrastructure at China's borders today. In particular, building upon the literature on b/ordering mentioned above, I address the nexus of cross-border mobility and infrastructure development that defines China's borderlands in the 21st century. Infrastructure, in the Chinese context, is a shorthand for development. Infrastructure is both an index of development and the *conditio sine qua non* in its implementation. Development, on the other hand, is for the most part understood and performed through new infrastructure. Such infrastructure also represents a civilising machine: something that puts people, things, and the state into new relations (Gidwani 2008). The Chinese borderlands, in particular, have come to be defined by state-led efforts to “open up” or “integrate” them through infrastructural interventions. Fostered by programmes such as the *xibu de kaifa*, this infrastructure has radically reshaped livelihoods in most borderland areas across the country. Through such projects, as I show in this book,



the Chinese state itself is encountered, enacted, and represented by those living in proximity to the borders.

In order to account for China's borderlands unique role and position, I structure the book around three key notions: proximity, curation, and corridor. Each notion speaks to a particular body of literature that is central to the study of borderlands, namely: mobility, state power, and exchange. Proximity, curation, and corridor do not represent novel concepts through which I am to capture particular ways in which space is made, state power deployed, and transnational exchanges carried out. Rather, they represent an attempt to come to terms with the processual, historical, and contingent nature of cross-border relations that I have discussed above. In so doing, they aim to guide the reader by providing analytical tools to view China's borderlands in their complexity and multiplicity. They are starting points for approaching the borderlands, rather than totalising frameworks that fully embrace them.

## Outline of the Book

The book is divided into three parts, with each part built around two chapters, an interlude, and a coda. For each part, one chapter analyses a case from the Xinjiang borderlands and one from the Yunnan borderlands. The interlude and coda serve the main purposes of connecting the two cases and making a general argument about, respectively, proximity, curation, and corridor, while helping the reader to navigate between the two different geographical contexts. Each chapter, and indeed each of the three parts of the book can be read independently: while some of the people, places, and conceptual references return throughout the volume, each chapter makes a specific point. There is, nevertheless, a coherence to the whole book that suggests a linear reading – one that acclimatises the reader to the line of argument that is developed throughout the text.

The first part of the book – proximity – departs from the following realisation. While there is a “strong association between borders and stopping things from happening” (Green 2012: 576), it is equally true that the friction created and performed by national borders can create possibilities for people to take advantage of particular economic differences by virtue of personal relations and skills. As I show, many such skills and networks are not new, they are rather rooted in long histories of cross-border exchanges that are often obscured by current understandings of globalisation. Proximity, in this regard, rather than referring to a purely spatial condition is





defined as something that needs to be constantly made and remade.<sup>34</sup> In the context of cross-border interactions, this notion is used to address the set of skills that allows for particular exchanges to occur, and businesses to thrive. Chapter 1 introduces the notion of proximity through an analysis of China-Pakistan cross-border trade along the Karakoram Highway (KKH). As proximity defines the geographical, cultural, and historical closeness that characterises (at least some) border regions on China's peripheries, my argument is that this particular closeness became an asset for many traders in the aftermath of China's opening up in the 1980s, 1990s, and still well into the 2000s. By way of such proximity, I show how Pakistani traders from the northernmost parts of the country managed, in those years, to set up successful cross-border businesses. This Chapter traces the lives of some of these traders and discusses the content of their businesses, as well as the skills necessary to operate in such environment. The second chapter tells a similar story of cross-border connections from Western Yunnan. Situated at around 100km from the Burmese border, the city of Tengchong has a long history as an administrative, military, and trading outpost. Following the fall of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989, and the opening of official border crossings with Burma, Tengchong traders with long-term experience and overseas family connections profited from dealings in jade, timber and, most recently, amber. This chapter in particular details the story of the trade in timber to show how the state is embedded in processes of proximity. By doing so, I also show the intertwined nature of private and public interests, and how the definition of particular border infrastructure was the result of private initiative, rather than government decision.

Part two of the book is structured around the notion of curation. Not intended as a reference to the work of museum curators, with this notion I seek an alternative to reductive dualisms such as hegemony-resistance and ideology-practice in the study of development projects at China's borderlands. Rather, by stressing the moral and aesthetic components of such projects, the notion of curation points to infrastructural interventions' attempts to change the material and social space in minority regions – and by so doing, re-make minority subjectivities. Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of another Yunnan border community, the Drung of the Dulong Valley, in the province's north-west. I introduce the notion of curation through an analysis of the impact of China's state-led programme, the "Building a New Socialist Countryside," according to which all inhabitants of the valley have been moved into newly built houses in larger settlements. I argue that the state,

34 A *doing* that echoes Saxer and Zhang's (2016) notion of neighbouring.



by defining the Drung as primitive, sees a particular form of development as a “healing” process through which ethnic minorities can be lifted out of poverty and into modernity. Furthermore, “curation” refers to the aesthetic components of such development projects, where villages, in order to *be* modern, need to *look* modern. In the Dulong Valley, however, promises of development attached to this particular resettlement project are yet to materialise. For most local inhabitants, in fact, the new houses and the forced abandonment of traditional forms of agriculture have led to increasing reliance on state subsidies. For the Drung people, modernisation brought more rather than less dependency. Chapter 4 returns the book to Xinjiang and touches upon issues of tourism, cultural production, and cultural dispossession through the case of the reconstruction of Kashgar’s old town. This project, which was at its peak during my doctoral research in 2012–13, involves over 30,000 households and has completely remodelled Kashgar’s cityscape. Most parts have been rebuilt in a neo-traditional style meant to preserve, or rather redefine, an atmosphere of authenticity – and thus to determine what it means to be Uyghur today. In this context, practices of curation capture a particular mode of ruling that the Chinese state employs in its minority-populated borderlands. It thus evokes yet another meaning of the word: that of “taking out”, or “selecting.” Elements of Uyghur-ness that are not akin to the government vision, such as the importance of Islam, are simply left out of the display of Uyghur culture showcased in the newly built Kashgar old town. As such, curatorial interventions are particular relations of power that are expressed in aesthetic values defining notions of heritage-making and based on market-driven interests as well as the state’s attempt to enforce legibility and control.

Issues of legibility and control at the juncture of proximity and curation are at the core of Chapter 5, which addresses one of China’s most ambitious projects under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This chapter argues that together with spectacular promises of development, CPEC brought a renewed attention to security in Xinjiang’s far west. Moving from fieldwork among Uyghur migrants in Pakistan, I show that securitisation has been part of China’s strategy since the early 2000s, and that it represents an integral element of Chinese-style development in the region and abroad. In the case of Xinjiang, securitisation has had an uneven impact among the local population, targeting in particular Muslim Uyghurs, for whom it became increasingly difficult to obtain passports and visas to travel abroad. Therefore, despite BRI claims of inclusiveness and win-win outcomes, the development of cross-border infrastructures has hindered local traders’ ability to partake

in cross-border businesses in which they previously thrived, as described in Chapter 1. In general, this third part looks at some of the consequences of the ongoing corridor-isation of trade through BRI-related projects, namely: increased security (Chapter 5) and the institutionalisation of illicit practices (Chapter 6). As I discuss in the interlude, I address “corridor” as both a conceptual tool to unpack how infrastructure can act as a technology of exclusion, as well as the material devices through which such marginalising dynamics unfold. Chapter 6, in this regard, focuses on recent research with amber traders in Tengchong to show that economic corridors and Belt and Road fantasies, while undermining small-scale businesses by making a claim to legality and transparency, foster the integration of illicit practices by state authorities. The amber case in Tengchong is particularly compelling, showing how, in recent years, wealth derived from amber concentrated in fewer hands, while pushing small traders into illegal undertakings, or out of business altogether. In the process, however, the “illegality” of the business – based on unregulated imports of amber from Burma – persists.

