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ABSTRACT

China's borderlands have received increased investment and policy attention since Beijing formally launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. This special issue, comprised of four research articles and a photo essay, is designed to provide a timely intervention into the growing literature seeking to situate and assess this important policy campaign. Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork in China's southwestern, northwestern, and northern borderlands, the contributing authors analyze recent borderland transformations against the backdrop of the BRI. However, by shifting the analytical focus to prioritize voices and events in borderlands, the papers de-center Beijing-centric discourse on the BRI, and provide urgent reminders of region-specific geographies and histories. Taken together, the papers underscore the persistent social complexity of borderland situations, revealing intricate processes of resistance, adaptation, and muddling through, while highlighting continuities and ruptures associated with the present moment.

In 2011, China's state-run television channel, CCTV-4, launched a monumental 100-part series with a title that translates as *Borderland Journey* (边疆行). The premise of the show is to follow its hosts as they hug the outline of the national territory as closely as possible in a jeep or sometimes on foot, ultimately tracing China's territorial margin on its inner side. Adopting a format blending news reportage and travel documentary, the show's hosts spend much of the on-camera time recounting the arduousness of accessing the national peripheries and commenting on the interesting peoples who inhabit them. In one remarkable segment of the series, a hostess follows a middle-aged Uighur man in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, whose periodic task in warm seasons is to clear the growth away from a nearby border marker. The hike from a trailhead to the stone marker is leisurely, so the pair casually chats en route about the seriousness of the man's job and the vital importance of ensuring the marker is visible amid the tall grasses and shrubs. Upon arrival at the marker, vegetation

has encroached upon it and the man sets about removing the bushes and brushing away dirt and other debris. The man tends to the marker with great care. Before long, the hostess begins to weep as she watches the man work, confessing into the camera that she has been overcome by emotion at the sight of the Uyghur man's resolute maintenance of the national border marker. The segment ends as the hostess composes herself and she and the man returns together by foot to the jeep in which she will continue her journey.

The passionate nationalism exhibited in this segment is a consistent feature of the series and reflects the powerful emotions evoked by territorial sovereignty and borders in China. As Franck Billé (2014) has documented, the dissolution of territory – or merely the threat thereof – can ignite passions that generate visceral feelings of loss. Conversely, earnest displays of territorial defense can spark eruptions of tender affect.

Contemplating this vignette from the *Borderland Journey* series, we are reminded of how China's borderlands elicit not merely curiosity toward the different ethnic communities that inhabit those regions but also trigger concerns about borderlands' political and cultural orientations vis-à-vis the nation as a whole. Such concerns are not new. Indeed, they are inseparable from the deeper histories of contested political and social control in China's borderlands. But they are animated in recent years by escalating state violence, mass detentions, militarization, and securitization on the one hand, and sweeping, high-profile state-led development programs like the Open the West campaign launched in 1999 and, most recently the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formally inaugurated in 2013. These programs' shared aims have been to stimulate and secure flows of capital and commodities through China's border regions while at the same time more tightly integrating the multi-ethnic frontier into the national fabric. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the combination of assertive – often violent – state presences coupled with massive investments focused heavily on infrastructure and extraction have dominated our understanding of China's borderlands in the current day.

This special issue arose from a workshop inspired by the recent developments in China's borderlands just outlined. One of the intellectual aims of the workshop was to join a growing academic discussion triggered by the BRI, which, as we see it, can be generally classified in two ways. One line of policy-oriented research on the BRI has tended to assess its prospects and impacts as a geopolitical gambit. Attention is paid to funding mechanisms, policy pronouncements, political agendas, and the types of bilateral and multilateral institutional apparatuses intended to advance the program's ambitious goals (Clarke 2017; Yu 2017; Bai and Wang 2014; Aoyama 2016; Blanchard and Flint 2017; Zhai 2018). A separate trans-disciplinary literature, with which this issue is most closely aligned, has explored the BRI's decidedly uneven and complicated territorialization in different parts of the world through first-hand research in the places where the BRI influence is felt. This work has examined, for example, the

BRI-related infrastructure construction as an articulation of political relations in Nepal (Murton and Lord 2020), the contrast between the BRI rhetoric of mutual exchange and, on the other hand, increased securitization of the Sino-Kazakh cross-border flows (Grant 2020), and the tumult playing out in the shadow of the grand rhetoric of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Karrar 2019). Further research has explored the BRI as one of the drivers of environmental degradation in China's restive border region of Xinjiang (Joniak-Lüthi 2020), or the uneasy relationship between the BRI's agenda to build a "people's bond" and the protracted Han Chinese cultural ignorance vis-à-vis ethnic and racial "others" (Cheng 2020).

While both strains of research have delivered important insights, a central intent of the original workshop was to avoid performing the ideological work of ascribing coherence and purposiveness to the BRI, and instead to focus on the locally specific processes of muddling through and local adaptations to continuously emergent constraints and possibilities, some of them related to the BRI, others having much longer histories. In this sense, the workshop and the papers gathered here also productively resonate with recent studies of borderlands, where borderlands are found to be critical sites for the articulation of new modes of state power in an era of neoliberal globalization (Agnew 2004; Elden 2006; Brunet-Jailly 2011; Johnson et al. 2011). More specifically, borderland communities become significant, as they experience close up the uneven dismantlement and simultaneous erection of new border apparatuses and governance regimes aimed at achieving the twin objectives of security and growth through regional and cross-border integration (Horstmann, Saxer, and Rippa 2018).

China's borderlands are an apposite setting to explore how vigorous efforts to drive continental integration are remaking border practices, reconfiguring material spaces at and near borders, and transforming existing social relations and patterns of movement. The BRI signals a significant change, as borderlands are expected to become important interfaces between China and the rest of the Eurasian landmass. Chinese borderlands are now treated as dynamic commercial spaces through which surging flows of manufactured goods and raw materials are expected to pass. A series of newly constructed border zone transshipment sites, like the Khorgos Special Economic Zone at the China–Kazakhstan border, illustrates the urge to refashion borders into spaces of connection and flow, and to rebrand China as an infrastructural powerhouse and commercial hub.

These efforts to stimulate cross-border flows and refashion China's borderlands have been interpreted in many quarters as a sign of a monolithic "China" arising on the world stage and remaking the landscape of global capitalism. Yet, as Klinger and Muldavin (2019) have cautioned, such reductionist understandings are not only incomplete for their inability to capture the heterogeneity of the Chinese state and Chinese capital, they further abet militarized containment responses. They argue – and we agree – that what is needed are grounded, ethnographic studies that reveal the multiplicities of actors, contexts and

a multiplicity of planned and also unplanned effects that are part and parcel of the BRI, just as they were for the earlier state-led development programs in borderlands. To this end, the papers in this special issue collectively ask: how do local people navigate the complex institutional and cultural terrains of China's rapidly changing borderlands? How have the rising and subsiding waves of investment and political attention – related to the BRI but also preceding it – altered cross-border relations and activities? What might today's borderlands have to teach us about China's role in regional and global integration, and its vision of connectivity? And last, what can be learned about the BRI through ethnographic studies of the developments that the BRI-related investment and the Silk-Road rhetoric have triggered in China's multi-ethnic border regions?

Contents of this special issue

This special issue begins the task of addressing these questions by grounding the study of recent borderland transformations in the histories, spatialities, and subjectivities of China's border regions. The discrete articles in this special issue do so by providing ethnographically informed foci on a range of issues, including borderland trade, security, cultural exchange, and infrastructure. Together, they show the diversity and highly fragmented nature of Chinese state authority in the borderlands today, and the many adaptive paths local societies take in response to the BRI and other forms of increased central-state presences. Further, they shed crucial light on connections, adaptations, alliances, and complex entwinements that render China's borderlands a porous and multi-layered space of interaction, a multi–vectoral space and not merely "marginal" or "peripheral" in the state-dominated sense.

In the opening article of this special issue, **Thomas White** shows how ethnic Mongols in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region use the allegoric power of the Bactrian camel – the ultimate caravan animal herded up to the present by local Mongols – to incorporate their localities back into trans-Eurasian networks that conspicuously omit Beijing and eastern China as centers of attention and activity. His study illustrates how Mongols in the region's western-most Alasha League use the narrative of the Silk Road that is currently central to the BRI imaginary to transform the spatiality of a region long defined by its peripheral-ness into a privileged, central space on a new axis of trans-continental move-ment. Branded in the past as a remote, pastoralist territory living off government subsidies, Alasha currently re-negotiates this image by emphasiz-ing its history of participation in Eurasian camel caravanning seen today as direct predecessors of the connectivity celebrated in the BRI. Eurasian connec-tivity promoted in the BRI thus resonates productively with local Mongol social memory constructed in the present.

Karin Dean's contribution is a similarly complex narrative about the border spaces which are on the one hand at the center of geopolitical and security

concerns of the central state, and on the other are places of complex ethno-national belongings. As Dean makes clear, the inhabitants of the Myanmar-Kachin-Chinese borderland have always been in the orbits of numerous over-lapping and simultaneous political projects, each creating their own power relations, connectivities, and selective disconnections. Dean employs the conceptual frame of assemblage to bring into view seemingly disparate components of this particular border-scape and their many mutual relationships. By applying the notion of assemblage, and thus proclaiming the importance of rhizomatic entanglements rather than a priori positions and roles, Dean breaks down the state into variegated and often contradictory sets of practices rooted within a particular borderland conjuncture.

This multi-scalar nature of the state is a central theme in **Alessandro Rippa's** contribution. His study explores how Chinese central-state investment in the BRI aims at generating specific geographies of networked economic and trade relations, at the same time reconfiguring preexisting trans-border business practices based on personal relations and accumulated trust at the China–Myanmar and China–Pakistan borders. Rippa argues that changes in the regional political and economic landscapes driven not least by increased investments in infrastructure, in parallel with the more stringent regulation of trans-border exchanges brought about by the BRI, are displacing economic ties rooted in proximity between trans-border communities that had flourished since the 1990s. Critically analyzing the figure of the "economic corridor" used frequently in BRI-related official rhetoric to allude to a favored form of cross-border connectivity, Rippa argues that state-led efforts to bolster cross-border trade ultimately exclude local communities in border regions from many of the intended benefits, and concentrate benefits on those engaged in more formalized exchange, large investment, and trans-regional networks dominated by well-positioned non-local actors. In short, small-scale traders who populate border areas have been systematically supplanted by larger capital interests with few local connections.

In her contribution on central heating and home air conditioning in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, **Madlen Kobi** shows another way in which the Chinese state advances territorial consolidation through mundane, everyday infrastructures. She shows how the provision of basic public goods, including thermal heat in winter and electricity for cooling in summer, quite effectively brings a multi-ethnic regional citizenry tighter into the national fold by increasing dependence on the state as a monopoly provider of such services. Provision of these services also has the effect of habituating local populations to centrally determined regulatory norms. Kobi shows how Uyghur and Han citizens alike have come to associate the provision of heating and electricity in on-grid apartments in high-rise buildings with the material standards of global modernity and have developed expectations of the state to ensure such provision. Focusing on the materiality of thermal standards in architecture, the article analyzes how the central state materializes at the intimate scale of bodily

comfort in Xinjiang, and how this scale is linked with political legitimacy and territorial interests in this vast and contested border region.

Last, in a collection of photographs and an accompanying short essay, **Karolina Koziol** captures scenes in cities of China's border province of Heilongjiang to reflect on the unusually dense accumulation of symbols of imaginary Russianness. While Russian-built architecture is steadily decaying in the cities across the northeast, a number of iconic symbols of Russia – most of all, the matryoshka dolls – become pervasive in those very same cities, together with Russian-inspired tourist attractions and theme parks. Koziol shows that where the two countries meet at their respective peripheries, a vibrant economy has developed, which capitalizes on Chinese domestic tourists eager to experience Russia without crossing the border to experience the post-socialist reality of the Russian Far East, yet do so by immersing themselves in the hyperreal representations of Russianness "made in China."

Contributions of this special issue

The articles in this special issue make contributions along three main fronts. We elaborate upon these below.

The salience of borderland geographies to state projects

First and foremost, the articles here individually and collectively underscore the vital, shaping roles of different geographies and histories in the borderlands for the unfolding of state-led development initiatives. China's borderlands are not blank spaces easily traversed or erased by the Develop the West campaign or the BRI, notwithstanding official rhetoric about new connections linking points across Eurasia with the Chinese industrial heartland. These large-scale development schemes, which have directly or indirectly sought to remake regions along China's land borders, have consistently been challenged by the realities they encounter in place. In this sense, this special issue argues that China's multi-ethnic borderlands, as critical spaces which all the BRI land routes necessarily need to traverse, must be much more prominently included in analyses of the BRI's potentialities. The policy and economy-focused literature on the BRI currently extends a tradition of imagining transformative agendas with what we might call "a view from Beijing" (for example, see Liu and Dunford 2016; Clarke 2017). This perspective has the effect of placing the central state at the center of analysis, with borderlands standing, implicitly or explicitly, as obstacles to be overcome with improved infrastructure or as deviant regions of ethnic discord and developmental backwardness in need of (state-enforced) harmonization campaigns. The tendency of analyses to replicate this standpoint has left unaddressed how the BRI stands to be affected by the necessity of traversing historically

contested and topographically challenging spaces. The assertion that the BRI represents the ascendance of a transnationalizing China consistently disregards the on-the-ground realities of borderland life. The authors in this issue also pay particular attention to regional histories to show continuity with decades of interaction with successive national and regional development agendas, not just the BRI. This is important because the BRI has grown in concert with other territorial and political projects, such as, for example, the expansion of national infrastructure grids and transformations of the border and ethnic-management regimes, as well as environmental conservation programs. On top of these are layered multiple development agendas at work in the borderlands, which are too easily neglected when folded under the discursive umbrella of the BRI.

This special issue highlights the manifold resistances, conflicts, and unexpected adaptations and continuities that are part and parcel of local geographies and that variously frustrate and facilitate the fulfillment of the central state's policy objectives. For instance, in Inner Mongolia, as Thomas White shows, the BRI has unexpectedly generated new forms of identity-rooted agency for Mongol camel herders. More specifically, it has provided a framework to rephrase longstanding efforts to maintain camel pastoralism and reconnect the region culturally with North Asian histories. In Xinjiang, on the other hand, huge investments in the transportation, energy, construction, and agricultural sectors in recent years have occurred alongside an expansion of the violent surveillance state and mass incarceration targeting Uyghur and other Muslim minorities (Kobi, this volume; Zenz 2018; Zenz and Leibold 2017). The Chinese state appears determined to tie this vast border region more tightly to central China through a comprehensive set of regulatory regimes, infrastructures, and ideological campaigns. Meanwhile, the Kachin in the Sino-Kachin-Myanmar borderlands and Pakistani traders at the China–Pakistan border have had informal trans-border economic activities disrupted, paradoxically in the name of facilitating economic development under the BRI (Rippa, this volume). Karin Dean's article, on the other hand, describes a motley assemblage of actors that make up the China-Kachin-Myanmar border. This assemblage of actors renegotiates and re-makes central state plans, the BRI included, as these enter this fluid multi-lingual and multi-ethnic borderland. In yet another variation, as Karolina Koziol demonstrates, in the cities in China's Northeast bordering the Russian Federation, the current developments are deeply embedded in the multi-ethnic history of the region, as the cities in the Northeast are styled as both: representative spaces to impress the Russian "other," but are also spaces where this "other" is welcome to boost the cultural capitalist production.

Analytical perspective from within the border regions

Second, the articles included here propose new, regionally specific analytic lenses on borderland dynamics in ways that move the discussion of borderlands beyond their typical framing as geopolitical flashpoints at nations' territorial margins. China's borderlands have long been framed as culturally marginal and socio-economically lagging. Chinese leaders have also recognized that the borderlands perform vital functions as natural resource frontiers and food production zones, in addition to serving as national security buffer zones (Kinzley 2018). In light of these uneven relations between China's power centers and its borderlands, notions of core–periphery relations and internal colonialism have exerted tremendous influence on the study of China's borderland politics and economics (Harrell 1995; Sautman 2000; Cliff 2016). Borderlands tend to play the role of the internal colony vis-à-vis the colonial metropole, located typically in Beijing or in eastern China more generally. In an extension of this argument, Dru Gladney (*1998*1998) and Louisa Schein (2000) have proposed the lens of "internal orientalism" as an analytical framework to grasp the power inequalities in the relationship between the Han Chinese majority *minzu*[1] and the non-Han *minzu* who inhabit vast areas of northern, southern, and western China. As important as this work has been, we find that there is a risk of accepting the marginality of borderlands as a geographical and social fact and reifying the central state's vision upon the borderland.[2] While the core-periphery and metropole-colony frameworks help reveal the many ways China's border regions are cast in nationalist and Han-centric geopolitical terms, the studies included here reveal the shortcomings of a Han-centered and state-centered analytical lens and echo calls to think outside the state-territorial frame (Malkki 1992; Agnew 1994; Amelina and Faist 2013). Recognizing the uneven material and representational relationships that entangle the multi-ethnic border regions with China's geopolitical core, the articles gathered here deploy a more fragmented optic on power relations, one that originates within the border regions themselves and that re-centers the periphery to tell borderland stories. Through this prism, the Chinese state is revealed as an inconsistent structural effect of bureaucratic, representational, and material practices, rather than the sole locus of political power.[3] In other words, while Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia might be conceptualized as internal colonies – and the BRI narratives that cast these regions as "economic corridors" might be said to strengthen this representation – the articles here demonstrate that border regions are not so easily contained under such descriptions. Rather, the articles here show that borderlands are entangled in relationships that have other reference points than Beijing. We see this, for example, in White's analysis (this volume) of the connections established through shared nomadic North Asian history, the fascination with Rusianness that Koziol finds in Heilongjiang, Dean's intricate tracing of relationships forged among Myanmarese, Kachin, and

Chinese inhabitants in and across the Sino-Myanmar borderland, Rippa's story of the making and unmaking of business networks operating across the China–Pakistan border, and finally also in the impacts of global debates about thermal standards for housing in architecture that Kobi explores in Xinjiang. Across the individual contributions, the state comes into view more in the form of embodied presences than a single, agentive doer. Moreover, the emphasis in the papers on movements and relations within the borderlands highlights how relationships and connections in borderlands point in other directions than simply back at the national power center.[4]

Slow ethnography as a methodology for studying large-scale projects "On the ground"

Third, on the methodological front, the papers collectively make a powerful case for the value of what we call "slow ethnography" for studying large-scale, transformative projects, such as the BRI. In this regard, they join their voices with recent reflections on the unique value of slower-paced work (see McSweeney and WinklerPrins 2020). The contributing authors, among them anthropologists and geographers, conducted fieldwork for the studies included here over the past 10 years, with multiple, extended stays in the field and repeated re-visits. This kind of long-term, slow, ethnographic fieldwork is difficult to undertake, sometimes for personal reasons, sometimes because of restrictive conditions for research, but increasingly also because of institutional conditions that require a constant stream of outputs at odds with the slow pace of long-term fieldwork. Ethnographic study of borderlands is always freighted with epistemological and positional challenges for researchers, and the sensitive settings in which the studies here were conducted undoubtedly limited access to some places, information and, people, thus introducing "silences" to conversations on some topics (Joniak-Lüthi 2016). Nonetheless, long-term ethnographic fieldwork involving the time-consuming work of listening and observing over long stretches allows for the collection of a fuller range of voices and vantage points. These diverse voices quite effectively reveal an array of local, regional, transregional, and transnational forces shaping each specific border situation.[5] Of special salience to this issue – i.e. to highlight an optic on power relations that does not necessarily take Beijing as the sole locus of political power – is that ethnography, with its slower-paced, dispersed mode of inquiry, appears well suited to avoid excessive attention being paid to the state's perspective on events, which is readily accessible through official statistics, news reports, or government policy papers, artifacts that a priori reproduce the state's ways of seeing.

Concluding remarks

This special issue was conceived in response to the renewed period of change facing China's borderlands, this time driven by a wave of investment and policy

attention associated with the BRI. These changes are likely to unfold over many years to come. The articles in this collection intervene in the growing field of research on the BRI by offering slowly researched, empirically detailed studies of China's borderlands that pay attention to deeper histories of trans-border connection and multiple forms of continuity and change. In doing so, they illustrate some of the under-appreciated stakes of China's ambitious plans for regional economic integration and political leadership. The BRI has clearly struck a nerve around the world, as it seems to signify a possible sea change in global power relations. China's own borderlands are likely to be a first testing ground to assess how durable and total these changes may be. Grounded perspectives on the borderlands will be needed to gain insight into this issue. This special issue is intended as a step in that direction.

Notes

1. *Minzu* are officially designated population categories in China; there are 56 of them. *Minzu* is translated either as "nation" or "nationality" (in Stalinist terms), or more recently and increasingly, especially in the official nomenclature, as "ethnic group."
2. See Oakes (2012) for a discussion on how China's border regions have been territorialized as "peripheries" in an effort to reproduce the idea of a unitary Han Chinese culture and ethnicity.
3. For other studies advancing or discussing a similar understanding of the state see: Mitchell (1991); Painter (2006); Navaro-Yashin (2012); Dalakoglou (2010); Anand (2017); Laszczkowski (2015); Reeves (2014).
4. Similarly to: Lattimore (1951); Bellér-Hann, Cesàro, Harris, and Smith Finley (2007); Bulag (1998) and Davis (2003).
5. For a similar argument made by another special issue in this journal with regard to urban research in China, see Tang (2019).

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