



Variegated borderlands governance in Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture along the China-Myanmar border



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ABSTRACT

International borders and associated borderlands—especially as viewed at the national and international scales, and via regional and global-scale maps—are generally thought of as being primarily governed by national governments. In reality, however, national borders and associated borderlands are complex and varied spaces, ones that are governed not only through national laws and regulations, but also an array of policies and localized practices, both formal and informal, conceived and implemented by government agencies and other non-government entities operating at various scales. This is especially the case for the borderlands we are focusing on. In this article we conceptually apply Agnew's idea of the 'territorial trap', Ong's notion of 'graduated sovereignty', Laine's conceptualization of the 'multiscalar production of borders', Amilhat Szary and Giraut's concept of 'borderity', and Brambilla's understanding of 'borderescapes' to consider the multiscalar and multi-sited nature of borderlands governance along the China-Myanmar border in Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. Focusing on the China side of the border, we emphasize how different scales of government agencies and non-government entities variously interact. Ultimately, these different actors create multiscalar borderescapes dependent on various situational factors, ones which are more complex than is typically acknowledged by national governments.

1. Introduction

The border between China and Myanmar (Burma) is typically associated in the international media and in academic writings with security, lawlessness and danger, including insurgent activities (AFP News Agency, 2015; Hua, 2015; RFA, 2015), illegal wildlife and timber trade (Nijman and Shepard, 2014, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Mizzima, 2016), drug trafficking (Su, 2015, 2016), vice and prostitution (Ripper and Saxer, 2016; Zhang et al., 2011), and dangerous diseases, especially malaria (Hu et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2014). There has, however, also been some more positive reporting related to transboundary business expansion along the border and the use of the border as an energy conduit (Lin, 2016; Ptak and Hommel, 2016), even if others are appropriately critical of these types of interventions (Kramer and Woods, 2012). While these are certainly important issues, they sometimes contradict another contrasting image of China as authoritarian, rigid, and centralized (Nathan, 2003; Mertha, 2005). Indeed, Ripper and Saxer (2016) have recently argued that the circumstances along the China-Myanmar border, including the development of large amounts of infrastructure and intensive resource exploitation, actually represent a

'successful' example of border development in the Chinese state vision. Su (2012) has also effectively demonstrated—again in relation to the China-Myanmar border—how the Chinese state has rescaled borderlands governance to facilitate transnational regional development initiatives, including the Greater Mekong Subregion programme and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar forum.

We emphasize the flexible and decentralized nature of the Chinese state when it comes to remote borders, through focusing on the policies and everyday multiscalar practices associated with borderlands governance that are evident on the Chinese side of the China-Myanmar border, in Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture (DAP) in Yunnan Province, southwestern China.

The objective of this article is to better understand the different scales of borderlands governance that are evident in DAP. To do this, we adopt a conceptual framework founded on five important scholarly works, ones that have not previously been used in combination. The first, which is well-known in borderland studies and geography more generally, is John Agnew's 'territorial trap' (Agnew, 1994, 2015). The second is Aihwa Ong's (2000) notion of 'graduated sovereignty', which is widely known within human geography and Southeast Asian studies.

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The third is Jussi Laine's (2016) idea of 'multiscalar production of borders', which emphasizes the different scales of existing borderland governance. The fourth is Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary and Frédéric Giraut's (2015) idea of 'borderity', which builds off Michel Foucault's well-known work on governmentality. The fifth is Chiara Brambilla's (2015) idea of 'borderscapes', which emphasizes the multiplicity of social spaces where borders are negotiated by varied actors. These five scholarly works, when combined in a single framework, are useful for helping us better understand various important aspects of borderlands governance, not only in our area of study but more broadly.

Our main argument is that borderlands governance as practiced by the Chinese State, particularly along the China-Myanmar border in DAP, takes on variegated forms, thus resulting in what some might consider to be surprisingly flexible policies and everyday practices, what we call 'variegated borderlands governance'. Our view is in line with an overall trend toward seeing borders and borderlands governance in more diverse and complex ways (Newman, 2010; Jones and Johnson, 2014; Amilhat Szary, 2015). This has not, however, been sufficiently investigated in relation to China's borders.

In the next section we present the different elements within our theoretical framework. We then describe our research methods, followed by a brief description of some of the overall characteristics of DAP. We then turn to the China-Myanmar border in DAP, providing numerous field examples to support our argument. These include considering borderland governance generally, cross-border trade, cross-border education, cross-border marriage, and the everyday workings of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). We finally provide some concluding remarks.

2. The territorial trap, graduated sovereignty, the multiscalar production of borders, borderity, and borderscapes

Five theoretical ideas are particularly relevant for conceptualizing our research. The first is the idea of the 'territorial trap', which was introduced by Agnew (1994) and revisited by him in 2015 (Agnew, 2015). Scholars in borderlands studies such as Paasi (2009), Newman (2010), Reid-Henry (2010), Shah (2012) and many others have variously engaged with this concept, which has become influential in borderland studies and geography more generally.

Agnew engaged with three main interlocking geographical assumptions that he warned us to beware of. The first relates to the often assumed association between state sovereignty and state territoriality. In reality, as he points out, the direct association between the two is often fictive. Indeed, imperialist ventures by powerful nation states on other less powerful ones clearly indicate that sovereignty is often not fully contained within territorial boundaries. For example, transnational corporations have long been able to use their influence to affect policies and practices in nation states apart from those where they are based (Agnew, 2015).

The second geographical assumption relates to seeing territorial or nation states as singular actors competing with other states operating at the same scale, and artificially squeezing or compartmentalizing other entities that operate at different scales within territorial states for the purposes of creating models of interstate competition. However, one only has to acknowledge that mercantilism has not been the guiding force for all economic policies of nation states over history to recognize the severe limitations of this assumption (Agnew, 2015).

The third assumption is that territorial states are strict containers for society. While it is true that nation states have often been quite effective, especially during the modern era but even before, of inspiring those living within their geographical boundaries to view particular problems and solutions through the lens of the nation state (see Winichakul, 1994 amongst many other works), it is also the case that various scenarios, both in the past and the present, have resulted in populations in certain parts of nation states to identify more with other groups of people located within the confines of different (and often

adjacent) states (Agnew, 2015). This is particularly the case when it comes to certain ethnic and religious communities that straddle national borders and hold irredentist views (Baird, 2010a, 2010b), but it can also be true for other groups of people politically inspired, or motivated by a combination of politics and ethnicity or religion (Baird, 2010c).

Many have already recognized the value of Agnew's argumentation, yet it is important that we continually remind ourselves of his warnings, so as to avoid inadvertently slipping into the 'territorial trap' in one way or another.

The second key theoretical idea is what Ong (2000) has called 'graduated sovereignty'. This concept is now well known within human geography and the social sciences generally, and also within Southeast Asian studies. Ong's original idea was not, however, formulated with specific reference to territorial borders, although she does discuss the development of certain specialized production zones involving more than one nation state. Her main focus, however, is on the unevenness of sovereignty across spaces constructed through interactions between global capitalism, non-market entities and middle-range Asian states. Ong's two main points are to:

- (1) illuminate the different modes of governing segments of populations that either variously relate or do not relate to global markets; and to
- (2) Expose the different mixes of legal compromises and controls that emerge and are tailored to the requirements of special production zones.

While Agnew warns us of what we should beware of, Ong gives us a sense of what we should be looking for in relation to sovereignty and governance. In particular, Ong asks us to be attentive to how unevenness develops with regard to relationships with global markets. We would go farther and say that we could simply remove the word 'global' altogether and state that people have different relationships with all kinds of markets operating at numerous but interrelated scales. Possibly more importantly, however, at least for this article, is that Ong's graduated sovereignty encourages us to search for legal compromises and controls that are specifically crafted to meet the needs of specialized production areas.

The third element is represented by Jussi Laine's (2016) idea of the 'multiscalar production of borders'. In particular, Laine draws on examples from Europe and Southeast Asia to demonstrate how borders tend to be complex, multiscalar, multidimensional, and yet dynamic entities, but that despite these qualities, also have important material forms, functions and locations, ones that deserve to be taken seriously.

The fourth element relates to the work of Amilhat Szary and Giraut (2015), who usefully explain how bounded forms of thinking emerged in Europe, and then were eventually transported to other parts of the world. They have made a particularly important contribution to the theorization of boundaries and borders, through focusing on what they call 'mobile borders', and usefully coining the term 'borderity', which builds on Foucault's earlier governmentality work, and can be defined as the governmentality of territorial limits. This idea is thus useful for examining how political subjects are both enabled and disabled by borders, and how borders can be sites of both power and counter-power. In particular, their work builds on a trend in borderland studies that emphasizes the importance of examining boundaries and borders through "the individual and his/her personalization of a mobile device" (Amilhat Szary and Giraut, 2015: 1).

The final element of our framework is represented by the 'borderscapes' approach developed by Brambilla (2015) (see, also, Brambilla et al., 2015). This work draws attention to the multiplicity of social spaces where different actors negotiate borders, as well as symbolic and material influences. Indeed, this approach envisions borders as mobile, relational and contested sites, ultimately endeavors to consider 'alternative border imaginaries 'beyond the line'' (Brambilla,

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