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## Review of *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands*, edited by Alexander Horstmann and Martin Saxer and Alessandro Rippa

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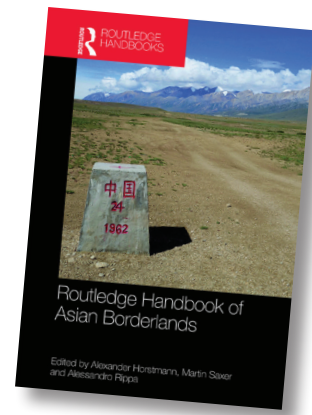
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***Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands.***

**Edited by Alexander Horstmann, Martin Saxer and Alessandro Rippa.** London and New York: Routledge, 2018. 462 pages. ISBN 9781138917507.

**Reviewed by Nadine Plachta**

Dramatic transformations are currently taking place in and across Asia's borderlands. The collapse of colonial regimes from the 1940s to the 1960s, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and independence of Central Asian states in the 1990s, and more recent structural changes and the outward expansion of China have all helped to generate new and distinctive border constellations throughout the region. As different states attempt to assert territorial control along their fringes through investments in infrastructure development and frontier commodification, supposedly disconnected and marginal regions are being recast as places ripe for economic development and capital accumulation. At the same time, conflicts over the drawing of post-colonial borders persist, calling attention to the disruptive and unsettling experiences of borderland situations.

*The Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands*, edited by Alexander Horstmann, Martin Saxer, and

The book asks readers to rethink and question the categories of state, nation, and periphery, and to thereby challenge the conventional assumption that borders are bounding frames and geographical containers for societies

*Plachta on Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands.*

Alessandro Rippa, attends to the multifaceted processes shaping the overlapping margins of borderlands in Asia today. The book asks readers to rethink and question the categories of state, nation, and periphery, and to thereby challenge the conventional assumption that borders are bounding frames and geographical containers for societies. Together, the contributions reveal that borders are porous and changing structures, characterized by permissiveness and flows. The volume makes abundantly clear that the intimate encounters of states and citizens in Asian borderlands are of great relevance as they allow for comparative perspectives in rethinking globalization from the edge.

The *Handbook* comprises 35 chapters that are organized in seven parts, collectively bringing to life a great diversity of people and places through ethnographic case studies. Ranging from traders in high mountain landscapes to sea nomads in archipelagos and maritime borderlands, the studies are based on original research from scholars with long-standing engagement throughout the borderlands of Asia.

Part 1, “Conceptual Framing,” introduces the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for the remainder of the volume. It provides a review of scholarship on borders and borderlands in Asia, including a discussion of the Zomia concept that surrounds Willem van Schendel

(2002) and James Scott’s (2009) influential work on upland Southeast Asia. The chapters of Part 1 also examine how post-colonial borders have hardened as the nation-state became the norm throughout Asia, especially through routine practices of securitization, displacement, and violence. An important contribution of these framing chapters is the assertion that borderlands are also contentious and gendered spaces, as women and subaltern people increasingly question, subvert, and challenge dominant hierarchies through their participation in armed struggles, trade, and wage labor.

Part 2, “Livelihoods, Commodities, Mobilities,” bridges historical processes and ethnographic considerations of the everyday activities, routines, and struggles of borderland inhabitants. The chapters examine how individuals and societies work to support their own efforts to make life sustainable and well lived. Interrogating cross-border migration and the flows of people, materials, and currencies, the authors acknowledge complex economic realities. They describe government development efforts to modernize local groups and show that proximity and distance are elemental for securing access to capital and social belonging. Borderland residents, the chapters demonstrate, consciously change and influence their economic and natural resource base to build resilient and meaningful livelihoods at the margins of the state.

Agrarian expansion and change in the use of forests is the focus of Part 3, “Physical Land Use and Agrarian Transformation.” The chapters combined in this thematic section attend to the ways in which states capitalize on borderland agriculture and perennial crop planting to consolidate peripheries and extend their power into neighboring territories. The chapters consider how global and national markets, as well as state agendas, shape planting schemes, swidden practices, and the commodification of forest products such as timber, palm oil, and rubber. These larger development processes in resource frontiers generate mechanisms to govern access over land and resources. But at the same time, they also allow rural inhabitants to use the borderland for their own advantage by reframing and resisting state technologies.

Part 4, “Borders and Boundaries of the State,” engages with state institutions and governance, as well as with the production of citizenship and statelessness. While states across Asia attempt to map and administer their fringes, state control is never absolute, as borderland residents have multiple and competing allegiances and identities that transcend state boundaries. Especially in regions where citizenship was subject to change as a result of the redrawing of post-colonial borders, or where borderlanders mobilize claims to autonomous state/nationhood demands, different frameworks for governance exist outside the

sovereign state. Borderlands, the chapters illustrate, are productive places both for the contestation of national affiliation and for the enactment of a politics of culture and belonging.

Part 5, “It’s all About Relations,” investigates practices of small-scale trade and brokerage to reconceptualize state/citizen relations in borderland economies. As different states set out to transform peripheral regions into economic corridors and border trading zones, these places become subject to mechanisms intended to control and discipline the margins. Looking closely at borderland inhabitants, the chapters show how people adapt to, navigate, and circumvent particular rules and regulations. The authors emphasize that border situations also encourage and enable economic niches and speculative investment, including both semi-legal labor and illicit practices. The revival of informal economies draw in people who come from far-flung places in search for success and opportunities. But as some spaces for investment open up, others close, and not all traders and entrepreneurs benefit in equal terms from the capital accumulation.

The chapters of Part 6, “Humanitarians, Religion, and NGOs,” describe faith-based, humanitarian grassroots organizations as important actors in borderlands. Particularly after natural catastrophes and during political conflicts, such as civil wars, individuals and societies suffer from armed assaults and human rights abuses. In borderlands where the reach of the state comes last, non-governmental organizations help affected populations by providing them with material relief aid (food, clothes, medicine) and emotional support to recover from crises. Due to their long-standing presence

and knowledge of a place, such organizations often have privileged access to local societies, sometimes partnering and at other times competing with larger organizations and networks. As the chapters point out, these humanitarian efforts shape moral economies and ethnic and religious identities, and transform bordering practices.

Part 7, “Militarization of Borderlands,” examines the intersections of the state, militarization, and neoliberal economies. In disputed territories and conflict zones, the state enforces control with armed soldiers and patrolling border guards, as well as through check points, cameras, and other technologies of surveillance and penalization. Borderlands are frequently depicted disturbing and dangerous places, where statehood is contested, and securitization becomes legitimized. However, such heightened tension is often more than a response to what is perceived a threat to national security. The chapters in this thematic section argue that militarization is also an outcome of a discursive process, allowing for changing societal beliefs, norms, and order. In contexts in which armed forces and war are present in the form of everyday images, symbols, and consumer practices in public life, the normalization of military presence obscures the effects of authoritarian state practices on those border residents who experience encounters with violence and fear.

The *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands* combines new research on the social, political, and material realities of individuals and societies living at the margins of the state. Through insightful and ethnographically grounded reflections, the chapters set new standards for a comprehensive

scholarship on borders and borderlands in Asia. The book is a valuable contribution and important resource for scholars and students of Critical Asian Studies, Borderland Studies, Social Anthropology, Development Studies, as well as Human and Political Geography.

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