traders expanded their operations – I have heard such success stories in Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan – mostly, traders contended with small margins. Profits financed the next trip. One summer, during a visit to Afiyatabad, I stood in front of a small stall piled with items shuttled across the border: electric pliers, flipflops, thermos flasks, batteries, small toys. Border trade laid out on a table.

This cross-border trade was enabled by public infrastructure: borders, open to the public; regular public transport; cargo forwarding services for those times when the merchandise could not be self-imported by traders on buses and trains.

New geopolitics

In 1991, five new states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – appeared along (or just beyond) Xinjiang's borders. New geopolitics, which included settling the disputed borders and acquiring energy security, initially framed Chinese policy towards Central Asia. While cross-border trade by independent traders in fact increased in the 1990s, it was eclipsed by wider strategic concerns, as China and newly-independent Central Asia built regional diplomacy.

In the unipolar world of the 1990s, China led the way in assembling a confidence-building multilateral mechanism between itself, Russia, and Central Asia. In 2001, this mechanism was institutionalized as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that was described as a model for broad multilateral cooperation, which allowed China to extend assistance to the Central Asian states, including in the commercial realm.

The new century was also when China started "going out," that is, Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private businesses were encouraged to invest abroad. Xinjiang became a bridgehead for investment in Central Asia and Pakistan. Some were large-scale investments requiring extensive injections of capital, such as the 2006 partnership between China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Kazakh KazMunayGas to import Caspian oil. Other investments were comparatively modest, such as the partnership between logistics provider Sinotrans Xinjiang and hereditary elites in north Pakistan to build and operate a dry port. This dry port also became operational in 2006.

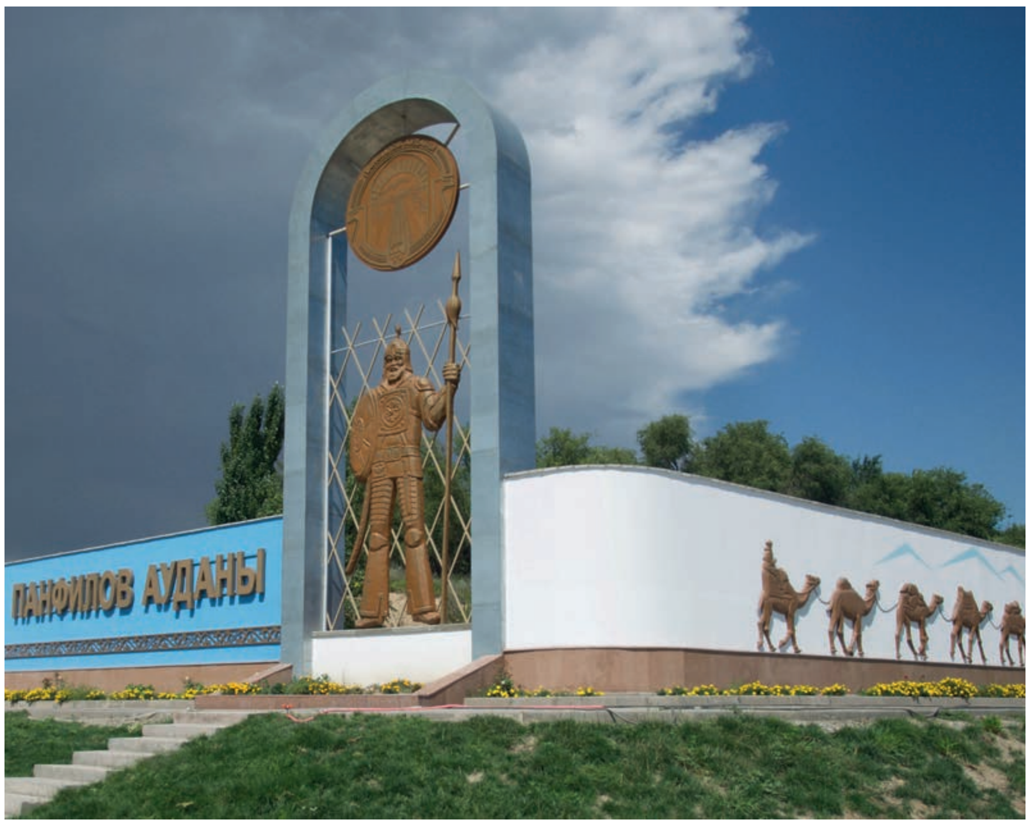

Fig. 2: Silk Road imageries – here depicted on the outskirts of Zharkent, Kazakhstan – are commonplace in Central Asia (Photo courtesy of the author, 2017).

Such engagements came to be seen as the realization of a "new Silk Road," a term that was popularized following Premier Li Peng's visit to Central Asia in 1994. In the quarter-century since, the Silk Road narrative has become curated. Today, historic figures such as Han dynasty envoy Zhang Qian (d. 114 BCE) and Ming admiral Zheng He (1371-1433/1435), along with images of camel caravans, reference a past prior to European imperialism in Asia, and they signal a present, Chinese ascendency.

Silk Road tropes are becoming commonplace in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan, suggesting how neighboring countries are adopting this particular geopolitical aesthetic from China [Fig. 2].

But the new Silk Road is markedly different from past connectivity in one crucial respect: earlier, the so-called Silk Road brought communities together. But now, under BRI, it is primarily finance and heavy cargo moving between distant nodes. Traders and shopkeepers I have spoken to in Afiyatabad – have visited five times in a decade – describe how, under BRI, independent cross-border mobilities have declined, both due to stringent tariff regimes and, more recently, to increased securitization in Xinjiang.

Securitized borderlands

The large-scale internment of Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang has mostly remained out of public conversation in Pakistan, a result of how Pakistan's civilian and military leadership has deliberately steered clear of the topic. But for small traders who cross into China overland, heightened vigilance, security checkpoints, and heavily armed security personnel in Xinjiang are impossible to overlook.[4] I have also heard traders grimly describe the internment of Uyghur women married to Pakistani traders, complaining that Pakistani authorities should have done more to secure their release.

The pall of security hanging over Xinjiang discourages independent trade. Small traders I spoke with complained of long waits and humiliating body searches at the border. They also face increased restrictions on mobility within Xinjiang, and in terms of where they can stay once they are there.

Similarly, cross-border mobilities between China and Central Asia have changed. Although Chinese authorities had long been cautious about independent cross-border ties fomented by Uyghurs and Kazakhs, until a few years back, Uyghur and Kazakh small traders were shuttling goods between Xinjiang and Central Asia. In my fieldwork in bazaars in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2013 and 2014, I met Uyghur traders who were importing garments and shoes from Xinjiang; this was a cross-border commercial network rooted in ideas of community and social well-being.[5]

But in 2017, I began hearing how it was becoming difficult for Uyghurs and Kazakhs from Xinjiang to leave China. Thus, while container trucks, railways, and ports are one face of the BRI, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that another defining feature of the current Silk Road – taking shape in the fifth decade since the reform era began in China – is securitization. In this long, complex story, Covid-19 may end up being little more than a wrinkle.

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Friction and Collaboration in Borderlands: Framing the Sino-Indian Borderlands along the Eastern Himalayas

Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman

The Sino-Indian borderlands straddles multiple strategic and securitized territories, and they span across diverse community worldviews and perceptions. As one travels from the northernmost borders of Ladakh through Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh in the easternmost fringes of the Himalayas, there are multiple layers of understanding of the borderlands, across spaces and temporalities. What we call the borderlands between the modern nation-states of China and India – framed in conflict and contestations over territoriality and sovereignty claims – intersect multiple scales of community and ecological worldviews and understandings. The forests, mountains, rivers, and sacred landscapes of communities who inhabit them, who have shifted along and moved across as the Himalayan landscape formed and crumbled over centuries, characterize transboundary spaces between China and India.

Sino-Indian borderlands and borderlines

Willem van Schendel depicts the India-China border as a "sensitive border" marked by uncertain sovereignty and apprehensive territoriality, with remarkably frayed edges. He goes on to argue that such a border cannot be called a border at all, as in official parlance it is referred to as the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC) or, more famously, as the "McMahon Line." It is based on the ground presence of the respective militaries along the border, or what is the perception of the borderline by them, usually negotiated on a regular basis by "long range patrols" which perform "area domination exercises" and monitor and inspect border pillars, some perhaps once in a year or two, given the remoteness of the borderline. The way ahead, according to van Schendel, is to approach such borders across transboundary spaces from the lens of "anthropology of frayed edges" rather than with the definite "geography of lines."[1]

Along the Sino-Indian border, there are several interesting tri-junctions, which underline the presence of a third country at the borderlines. Such tri-junctions involve Nepal and Bhutan in many different sectors, and these are nodes of traditional migration and trading routes across the difficult terrain of these mountainous regions. These tri-junctions have also been sites of territorial claims, contestations, and conflict, as we have recently witnessed in the Doklam plateau, involving the three countries of Bhutan, China and India.[2] The community imaginations, understandings, perceptions, and worldviews along these borderlands are based on memories of migration, trade, and pilgrimage routes; regular activities such as hunting in the forests, sources of daily livelihood such as transboundary rivers, wetlands and transborder community linkages. They are broader than that of the nation-state's perception of borderlines marked by mere border pillars.

The practice of marking borders on the ground, along which border contestations and claims are made, has followed natural geographical features such as mountains, hills, valleys, forests, plateaus, plains, and watersheds in the Himalayas. The "water-parting principle," wherein the edge of a watershed was used to establish the border, was a key marker of international boundary-making around the world in the 20th century, especially in mountainous areas where the dominant cartographical understanding was in terms of border points rather than borderlines.[3] The historical perception of border points in a mountainous area – such as border points across the length and breadth of the Himalayas – was bypassed with the "water-parting principle" as an imposed colonial marker to draw regional borderlines. We can therefore see that the Sino-Indian borderlands have several divergent markers.

Shepherds, hunters, and shamans

The Mishmi community along the Sino-Indian border in Walong and Kibithoo speak about their meetings and exchanges with Mishmi people across the LAC in the grasslands, where they regularly take their sheep to graze. They say that their brethren living in Chinese territory across Kibithoo are prosperous. They note that the Mishmi villages on the Chinese side enjoy better living conditions, housing, and sanitation facilities mostly made up of pre-fabricated structures. They can see the Chinese villages across the border and wonder why they cannot be opened up and allowed to travel to the other side. Some Mishmi community elders with whom I had conversations say that they do not feel intimidated by being close to the border and will want to visit their relatives across the border as and when such an opportunity comes. While the Mishmi recognize nationalist framings, the perception of the border at the community level is based primarily on shared tribal affinities.

Hunting is common amongst the Mishmi, as it is connected to their animist religion and traditions, which require wild meat to appease the spirits and protect deities in their festivals and family offerings. Mishmi hunters often spend weeks in the forests along the Sino-Indian border, and they come into contact with Chinese hunters who often cross into the Indian side. Apart from consumption and religious needs, hunting in the Mishmi hills is also done for commercial purposes, where musk deer and black bears are hunted for their pods and gall bladders, respectively; these are sold to businessmen from mainland

Border Crossing and Border Maintaining among the Kachin in Ruili

Rui Sun

A few days after I arrived in Ruili – a border city in southwestern China's Yunnan province – Ah Hpang, a Kachin friend I met earlier from the Sunday worship of Pa Se Christian Church, invited me to lunch. I was amazed by how she sophisticatedly procured several specialty dishes from the vendor in fluent Burmese. After lunch, Ah Hpang took me on a city tour of Ruili, where Burmese outfits – flip-flops and *longyi*[1] – were a common sight. There were also roadside billboards that advertised tutoring in Burmese or solicited Burmese translators. I grew up in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, one of the most ethnically diverse provinces in China. While there are 25 officially recognized minority groups in Yunnan among the total of 56 in China, the inhabitants of Kunming are predominantly Han-Chinese. Arriving in Ruili filled me with a sense of the unknown: for once I was a "guest" in my province. This acute sense of unfamiliarity in a neighboring town led me to be interested in Ruili as a research site, where several ethnic communities – Han, Dai, Jingpo, and Kachin – currently reside.

Much of my fieldwork took place at Pa Se Christian Church, frequented by many Kachin people in Ruili. Historically, Kachin people have been inhabiting Northeast Myanmar, particularly Kachin State and Shan State, bordering Yunnan. In the 1870s, missionaries established their first stations in Bhamo in Kachin State, and since then, Kachin people have gradually converted to Christianity and are primarily Christians by birth.[2] While there is no census data on the percentage of Christians among Kachin, the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) comprises about 400,000 members. Pa Se Christian Church became a place where Kachin communities establish and maintain their social connections, perform cultural identities, and seek livelihood possibilities in a foreign country.[3]

In 2016, roughly 500 Kachin people went to the sermons at Pa Se Church on Sundays, which were conducted in the Kachin dialect. A Kachin interlocutor said, "everything here [religious rituals at Pa Se Church] is an imitation of our KBC practices. Because ours are better, and we are the majority here [among the worshippers]." After the sermons in the afternoon, there were various fellowship activities such as birthday parties, choirs, or dinner get-togethers. These activities proceeded in the Kachin language, accompanied by Kachin food, and were exclusive to the Kachin community. Such exclusivity was initially derived from the language barriers between Kachin dialects and Han Chinese, and it was further enhanced through religious practices.

Only a few members of the Kachin community felt the necessity to learn Chinese and integrate into the local society. For most of them, Ruili was the place for "working" and not for "living." I knew a couple – living in Ruili for almost 20 years, working in the tailoring business – that spoke close to no Chinese. Their customers were also mainly from the church's Kachin community. For them, the Chinese language was only helpful when bargaining at the wet market, for which only a few pronouns and numbers were sufficient. The couple said to me during an interview, "We are going back to Bhamo when we retire. Here is not home."

In Ruili, more than 80% of the Kachin made a living by trading raw jade stones. There are many uncertainties embedded in such a business.[4] Kachin jade traders often sought their customers through church networks to reduce business risk and avoid fraud. Thus, the church further bound members of the Kachin community and limited cross-ethnic interactions.

Kachin people in Myanmar, Jingpo people in China, and Singpho people in India share the same ethnic origin and live in a similar landscape.[5] During the 1960s, a border demarcating China and Myanmar was established through diplomatic negotiations between the two countries. The Jingpo-Kachin people were separated into two distinct "imagined communities."[6] But cross-border interactions have never ceased. Many of my Kachin interlocutors have relatives in Yunnan, while Jingpos have relatives in Kachin State. Border-crossing is by and large only a political ideology, vaguely looming over the daily transnational activities of borderland inhabitants for whom the border is more of a social and cultural boundary than a definite demarcation of geography and nation-states. Some Kachin women married Jingpo men but still have minimal interactions with other inhabitants of Ruili. They crossed the geographical boundary of the two countries but maintained the social and cultural boundaries of the Kachin community.

My ethnographic work in Ruili explores the intricacies of cross-border interactions. Consider Awang Seng's experience, for example. Thirty-five years ago, Awang Seng's mother married his father from Myanmar and moved to Ruili. Awang Seng, instead, grew up at his grandmother's home in Myanmar until he turned nine years old, when his parents decided to bring him to China for primary school. Awang Seng recalled that he understood no Chinese initially and experienced difficulty keeping up with school. By the time I met him in Ruili in 2016, Awang Seng had just graduated from college in Kunming at age 28. By then, he had mostly forgotten Burmese or Kachin dialects.

Awang Seng self-identifies as Jingpo, yet he felt a sense of "dislocation" – a sense of being outside one's own familiar cultural space ¬– much like how I felt upon arriving in Ruili. On the one hand, he is a Jingpo man who speaks fluent Mandarin but lives within a circle of friends and relatives who are Kachin with no knowledge of Chinese. On the other hand, his Christian belief separates him from the local Han and Jingpo community, who worship ancestors and ghosts. Awang Seng attended the Sunday service at Pa Se Christian Church each week. "Preaching in Kachin dialects is ambiguous," he said, "it is mainly for releasing emotions rather than learning the Truth." Awang Seng's mother also went to the Sunday service: it became their weekly meeting place.

In 2021, when the Covid-19 situation in most places of China was more or less under control, Ruili frequently emerged on the news due to resurgent outbreaks. Many confirmed cases were traced back to stowaways who sneaked from Muse (Myanmar) to Ruili (China). However, it is a paradox to call these border crossers stowaways. In the local context, crossing the national border and entering China from Myanmar (or the other way around) is nothing more than visiting another town nearby. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, nation-states immediately tried to restrict international movement, but they have been largely unable to control the seasoned border-crossers of Ruili.

The actual border that divides Kachin from other peoples in Ruili is an intangible one, shaped by Christian practices and their strong self-identification as a distinct Kachin community. As one interlocutor puts it, "The identity of Kachin and that of Christians is inseparable. It is the church [KBC] that takes on the responsibility of preserving Kachin's traditional culture such as teaching Kachin youngsters our language." Religious and linguistic affinities reinforce ethnic identity and community among the inhabitants in Ruili. While Kachin people can easily cross the borderline between China and Myanmar, the boundaries between them and other local inhabitants are maintained.

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Notes

[1] *Longyi* is a large apron wearing like a long skirt which is popular among both women and men in Myanmar.

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Fig. 1: The eastern Himalayas stretching from the Mishmi Hills to Tibet, straddling across the Sino-Indian borderlands. (Photo by the author, 2013).

India or across the border in China for the traditional medicine market.[4] The nation-state of India invokes the hard border in the Sino-Indian borderlands; in practice, however, this border is quite fuzzy and fluid, with Mishmi hunters and shepherds having sporadic interactions across it. However, such interactions happen not through defiance by the local communities, and the nation-state is often cognizant of such transboundary encounters and interactions.

The number of Mishmi traditional shamans (priests), who conduct the animist customs in community festivals and family ritual offerings, has fallen significantly on the Indian side. Meanwhile, almost none exist in the Mishmi villages on the Chinese side. Mishmis from the Chinese side pay tribute to Mishmi priests from the Indian side to conduct rituals. This points towards a unique transnational exchange of rituals, offerings, and animist belief systems between the transboundary Mishmi community. Mishmis in Arunachal Pradesh say that they know that their Mishmi brethren cannot openly follow their animist religious rituals and practices in China due to the prevailing communist ideology. They accord a high value to cross-border interactions between shepherds, hunters, and shamans, in order to preserve their common Mishmi animist religion, culture, and identity, which illustrates a sense of belonging that is socio-spatial.

Borderland community relations effectively look across the borderline, be it contested or otherwise, to take in both sides of the borderland.[5] Such transboundary human relations help create, maintain, undermine, and even evade borders. They also challenge the idea of a national homeland that is sacrosanct and only determined and controlled by the nation-state. The lived social realities and community imaginations in Arunachal Pradesh can be effectively described by social and ecological framings and worldviews, which are in stark contrast with the strategic securitized framings and worldviews offered by the nation-states. The borderland communities across the Eastern Himalayas negotiate multiple identities to imagine geographies straddling nation-state borders.[6] In so doing, they foreground a sense of belonging based on transboundary ecologies.

Infrastructuring shared borderland ecologies

The securitized calculations of China and India have brought both countries to gather their strategic footprint along the borderlines through infrastructuring the borderland. The natural features that mark these borderlands (e.g., forests, mountains, and rivers) cannot by themselves serve as sovereignty markers on territory; rather, they have to be infrastructured in certain ways in order to be able to serve as effective sovereignty markers. The process of securitizing and infrastructuring these borderlands has brought roads, railways, mega hydropower dams, oil and natural gas drilling projects, and mining activities to both sides of the border. Several dams are already constructed and commissioned by China, and many are in the pipeline in India. In a race to dam the transboundary Brahmaputra, both China and India have put the shared borderland ecology of the Himalayas and its communities at risk.

The hydropower development plans by India on the Tawang Chuu and the Nyamjang Chuu are a case in point. These have faced continuing protests by the Monpa community, who straddle the transboundary spaces around the tri-junction between India, Bhutan, and China. The dams threaten sacred sites revered by transboundary communities in the region. They also threaten the habitat of the black-necked crane, considered to be the reincarnation of the Sixth Dalai Lama, who was born in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. The frictions we witness in the Sino-Indian borderlands operate at multiple levels. Dominant among them is the friction between the nation-states in a securitized framing. The friction is evident between, on the one hand, infrastructuring borderlands to achieve state presence, order, and control, and, on the other hand, the worldviews of borderland communities. This needs reconciliation through a sustained process of dialogue to protect shared ecologies across the transboundary Himalayas.

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