



The Asian Borderlands Research Network

Left: Registration table at the 6th conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2018.

Right: Participants of the 3rd conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network in Singapore enjoy a photo exhibition, 2012.

The Asian Borderlands Research Network focuses in particular on the border regions between South Asia, Central/East, and Southeast Asia. Its concerns are varied, ranging from migratory movements, transformations in cultural, linguistic and religious practices, to ethnic mobilization and conflict, marginalisation, and environmental concerns.

Its aim is to generate new knowledge and methodologies to better understand these transitional zones – and borderlands in general – by encouraging academic exchange between both local and foreign scholars from different backgrounds. For this purpose, ABRN organises a conference in one of these border regions regularly in co-operation with a local partner.

Scholarly and political boundaries divide Asia artificially into units, such as South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and so on. These divisions not only mask the many and varied commonalities that transcend such boundaries; they also reinforce the marginalisation of people who live in these so-called border areas. Yet a better appreciation of these 'transitional zones' is, in fact, critical to our historical understanding of processes of social and cultural change in the states lying beyond

Right: Participants at the 7th ARBN Conference in South Korea on an excursion to the DMZ.

Far right: Program booklet for the 4th conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, 2014.

them. Nonetheless, such a focus remains peripheral to area studies and the disciplines which feed into them.

The Asian Borderlands Research Network was developed to recognise the links, both historical and contemporary, that connect people in these borderlands, focusing on the border regions between South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, where

the prevailing notions of area studies have been particularly limiting.

The purpose of the ABRN is to encourage academic exchange between both local and foreign scholars from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds in the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

In what follows, we present brief writings from four participants in the

Asian Borderlands Research Network: Makiko Kimura, Robert Winstanley-Chesters, Busarin Lertchavalitsakul, and Eva Hung. Each piece reflects upon the place of ABRN in their own intellectual careers as well as its role in fostering academic conversations that challenge conventional disciplinary and geographical divides.



The Thailand-Myanmar border areas

Busarin Lertchavalitsakul

I became aware of the Asian Borderland Research Network (ABRN) when the second series was held in 2010, which was co-hosted by Chiang Mai University, Thailand. It was inspiring to see that the Enclosure, Interaction and Transformation theme of the conference later became the topic of my PhD.

The geographical focus of my PhD (fieldwork starting in autumn 2012) was around the Thailand-Myanmar borders. The conference allowed me to understand borderlands more broadly, and to think beyond the framework provided by fields within traditional Area Studies, such as Asian Studies and Southeast Asian Studies.

I have followed the conference themes to keep abreast of scholarly trends and turns in the field of Borderland Studies. In the post-PhD period, I have maintained an active research agenda in the Thailand-Myanmar border areas, and I offer a class on Borderland Studies to undergrad students. The border between Thailand and Myanmar is currently contested, with arbitrary and unpredictable border controls in place. In these locations the local people are forced to employ adaptive strategies to survive. The ABRN conference provides a platform to present and discuss these challenges, which are a result of the disparity between state directives and ground-level operations at the border. As such, I plan to attend future conferences, in order to share my work and to listen to

and network with other scholars. I believe this is important and necessary as there are many 'live' Asian border issues which could benefit from academic collaboration, drawing on the insights from multiple locations. For example, global phenomena such as migration flows from war-torn countries, economic repression since the early 2000s, and, more recently, Covid-19, have all had an effect on borderlands and prompted researchers to investigate their impact on people's lives. The ABRN conference allows us to explore these global phenomena and to see how paradigms and frameworks may have shifted.

Busarin Lertchavalitsakul,
Naresuan University, Thailand