

## Reflections on bordering with the Asian Borderlands Research Network

Robert Winstanley-Chesters

11th of October 2012 found me presenting as a very much emerging academic (a year away from completing my PhD), in Singapore for the first time. My paper, I am sure, was not at all memorable, but I will never forget the room. Vista, an ovoid glass pod on top of the National University of Singapore's University Hall on the Lower Kent Ridge Road campus, was truly one of the most beautiful spaces I had ever been in.

Our panel, "Landscape, Military and Diplomacy in Asian Borderlands", felt strangely fitting for the room, a space

suitable for the battle planning of some futuristic hybrid regime, from which much of Singapore could be seen, but also much more than I deserved at the stage of my career. This was the 3rd conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, hosted jointly by NUS's Asia Research Institute (ARI) and IAS, and from this year I have always felt most at home at this unusual caravanserai of an academic conference. I have had many memorable experiences, heard about the liminal, flexible, fluid practices of border culture in Nagaland across the Myanmar/India border, the back routes and pathways through the

hills of the Vietnam/PRC China border, where national sovereignty is performed by mobile phone infrastructures, and up to the Sino-Russian-Korean borderland spaces, contested by demographic change and geopolitical rebalancing. I have presented and organised panels at every ABRN since, with scholars and practitioners whom I really consider my semi-annual friends, reconvening our connection and collaboration in some unusual, unexpected, less familiar space. There is nothing else like it in academia, nothing like navigating the streets of Kathmandu (ABRN 5 in 2016), at night where not a single traffic light works in the entire city, hiking up and slithering down the Al Archa gorge with the rest of the conference participants outside Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (ABRN 6 in 2018), even visiting my own research home turf in Seoul in 2022 (for the delayed ABRN 7), and engaging in an almost psychogeographic navigation of the DMZ. Aside from the glassy beauty of Vista in 2012, I will remember forever my panel's visit in 2014 (at ABRN 4), to the very last night of the Umbrella Movement's protest encampment on the Admiralty flyover, where borders and frontiers of possibility seemed to be both remade, and about to be foreclosed. Amidst the fantastical graffiti re-imaginings of Studio Ghibli's Totoro as a resistive citizen of a future Hong Kong, colleagues and friends came together to break some of the ties that bind us to our sometimes tightly imposed frameworks of nationality and belonging. After these last few years, when many of the drivers of globalization appeared to go uncomfortably into reverse, when the airport lounges emptied, the cross border trains and busses stopped, the stratospheric sinews that stretch across the planet became ever thinner and more tenuous, a new infrastructure of biosecurity manifested in real time, the connective tissues of our shared global humanity became very fragile, as if we had returned to the world of our grandparents and great-grandparents where everywhere becomes once again very much over there or down there, half known about and seldom visited. In these times the continued connection and collision of the Asian Borderlands Research Network conferences are needed even more, needed to provide the opportunity for border scholars and practitioners focused on in-between spaces, to break our own borders, to actually land and engage with spaces we would normally simply fly over. I hope to see you at the next one, I know not where, though I am hoping for Ulaanbaatar. I certainly know it will be far away from me, but as Wim Wenders said "In weiter Ferne, so nah!"

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Below: Colleagues at the 6th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, Kyrgyzstan, 2018.



### Recollections of ABRN6

Makiko Kimura

I attended the first session of the ABRN conference held in Guwahati, Assam, India, when I was still a post-doctorate scholar engaging in fieldwork in the area. At the time (and to some extent even today) it was very rare to have an international conference in Northeast India. I was really excited to take part in the event and learn about the concept of border studies, which was significantly related to my research area.

Since then, I have attended four sessions of the conference (the first, third, fifth and sixth) and enjoyed each and every one. For me, it is a rare international arena where I can meet and catch up with scholars working on Northeast India and neighboring areas. At the same time, as the conference takes place in different parts of Asia, I can observe new themes and topics being presented and discussed. This gives the conference both continuity and change, and I've been able to learn about emerging trends in border studies discussions.

I've also enjoyed long-term friendships with many of the participants—some of whom I have known for decades. It was fun to enjoy an excursion to Kyrgyzstan together, although I somehow hurt my foot and suffered bad internal bleeding on the journey back. I would like to thank Willem van Schendel and his co-convenors for keeping this brilliant network alive, and Martina van den Haak, who has been managing its logistics for many years!

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Left: Umbrella Totoro, Hong Kong 2014. (Photo by the Umbrella Movement, 2014)

## Technologies, Zones and Co-existences

Eva P. W. Hung

I began my research on the political economy of cross-border parallel trade between Hong Kong, Macau and mainland China in 2014. Since then, attending the Asian Borderland Research Network (ABRN) conference has become an irresistible opportunity for me to get connected with scholars in the larger field of Borderland Studies.

The biennial conference brings together both rising and renowned scholars to discuss various aspects of borderland research, making it an ideal platform for intellectual exchange and exploration.

The countries where the conferences took place were also exciting. Nepal (ABRN5), Kyrgyzstan (ABRN6), and South Korea

(ABRN7) are countries with a rich cultural heritage and complex histories with their neighbours, making them ideal locations to explore the intricacies of borderlands. What is more fascinating, however, is how each country was also tightly connected to the respective conference theme.

ABRN5 was about dynamic borderlands, which was best reflected in how Nepal's geographical landscape shapes the livelihoods and communities of people living in the borderlands. ABRN6's theme, "Ruins, Revivals and Resources", reflects the rich archaeological heritage and vast natural resources of Kyrgyzstan. And what better choice for the conference in South Korea than to focus on "Technologies, Zones and Co-existences" (ABRN7), through the country's advanced technological

infrastructure and its existence with the heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone that separates it from North Korea?

What I appreciate most about the ABRN conference is not just its unique focus on borderland research but also how the location speaks to different issues of border regions. The intellectual exchange is always stimulating, and I came away with new insights and perspectives that will undoubtedly shape my future research on borderlands.

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