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Bangkok, White Lotus, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000, 346 pp.

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/251>

DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.251

ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 février 2003

ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

Beatrice David, « Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng (eds.), Where China Meets Southeast Asia, Social and Cultural Changes in the Border Regions », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 45 | january-february 2003, mis en ligne le 22 août 2006, consulté le 21 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/251> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.251>

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 The approach taken in this volume to the complex ongoing processes of change in the border regions where “China meets Southeast Asia” is definitely from the perspective of the social sciences, represented here by anthropology, sociology, linguistics, history, and ethnography. The result of these research projects conducted on both sides of the border separating China from Laos, Burma (Myanmar), and Vietnam, is to provide a survey of these often overlooked areas, which, as the title of the book rightly reminds us, do not fit neatly within any geographical, cultural, or administrative boundaries.
- 2 The fifteen essays are introduced by Peter Hinton’s interesting critical contribution on the way the changes have been conceptualised in a region where, to cite his own title, “nothing is at it seems”. Geoff Wade’s chapter surveys the different ways in which the idea of “border” has been conceived at various times in the course of Chinese history, shifting between cultural, geographic, economic, and political definitions. This approach provides us with an essential historical dimension that is all too frequently lacking in sociological studies focused on the present moment. A later chapter under

the joint authorship of Jean Michaud and Christian Culas likewise throws a historical light on the causes for the recent migrations of the Hmong people, from southern China to the mountains of the Southeast Asian peninsula, and then out of Asia completely, following the victory of the communist forces in Laos.

- 3 A concentration on social and cultural transformations does not mean neglecting the economic and political contexts in which they occur. A threadbare commonplace theory proclaims the disappearance of borders (and hence of the states themselves) following certain theorists of globalisation like Ohmae Kenichi. But on the spot investigations require a modification of such generalisations and overweening prophecies based on statistics taken out of context. In fact, the increase in cross-border traffic, which arose with the new economic policies adopted by the communist states from the 1980s onwards, has resulted in a tightening of state control in those border regions which are far from the central authorities. The effort to control this flow has necessitated the introduction of new practical and legislative measures, particularly in the area of trade. Kuah Khun Eng's article pays particular attention to Chinese policy on the cross-border trade between Guangxi and Vietnam. And Andrew Walker's observations on the economic rectangle on the upper reaches of the Mekong (between China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand) undermine the optimistic forecasts of the partisans of economic liberalisation, which is supposed to be putting an end to the nation states system.
- 4 The flows are certainly channelled and controlled, but political barriers are by their very nature fluid and permeable, and can never really stop them. This is amply shown by the way the vigorous trade in drugs, livestock, raw materials, and women, is growing up on both sides of the border. Moreover, the strength of this parallel economy, especially among the minority peoples, leads Peter Hinton to question the validity of a strict differentiation between "formal" and "informal" economies, since they are mutually intertwined in complex ways (p. 22). Reminding us of the often overlooked fact that ecology recognises no borders, the ethno-botanist Su Yongge presents a remarkably detailed and damning report on the disastrous trade in livestock and raw materials, over which official legislation is often powerless in the face of smuggling and the corruption of local authorities.
- 5 The political borders of modern nations form barriers between areas and peoples linked by long-standing ethnic, inter-ethnic, and trading relations. The ethnic networks which support cross-border exchanges are a major part of this relationship. Most of the writers in this volume tackle this fundamental issue, which is where the collection makes its most original contributions. Paul Cohen's article, on the annual pilgrimage to the Buddhist reliquary at Muong Sing in northern Laos, shows how religious practices are intimately implicated in collective identities and politics. Since the 1990s, this pilgrimage has enjoyed unprecedented popular support among the Lue living on the Chinese side of the border in the Sip Song Panna (*Xishuangbanna*), and its influence is not restricted to a religious concern with making merit. This minority has been incorporated by official Chinese ethnic classifications into the *Dai* "nationality", so the pilgrimage provides them with a space to express a collective identity which the Chinese state does not recognise. The Buddhist revival among the Lue can therefore be seen as a form of reaction against the threat to their minority situation from the growing pressure by the Han culture, and in this context, their religious practice is part of their passive resistance to the Chinese state (p. 156).

- 6 In his article on the transformations of Jing Hong, the ancient royal capital of the Sip Song Panna, Grant Evans describes the same situation affecting the local populations, which Chinese communist state policy has turned into “national minorities”. He stresses particularly the impact of Han immigration, which has intensified since the beginning of the economic reforms and involves a massive relocation of people from the hinterland, especially Hunan. This recent Han influx is a major factor in the “irrevocable Hanification” of the border regions, a process which freezes the minority cultures into stereotypical images and symbols for Han consumption. For example, the sexualisation of *Dai* women follows the lines of long-standing Han fantasies, which attribute to the frontier “barbarians” a moral laxity and a propensity to wild sexual practices, and this has contributed to an escalation in sexual tourism based on the consumption of such images of women from the ethnic minorities (p. 170).
- 7 David Feingold addresses the close links between this flourishing traffic in women, mainly directed towards the sex industry in Thailand, and the drugs trade. His article lays emphasis on the direct threat to the cultural and physical survival of the minority peoples most affected, along the frontiers where China adjoins Burma and Thailand (peoples such as the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Yao, Hmong, Shan, etc.). He examines the multiple internal and external factors behind the trade in women and girls, which hardly existed at all twenty years ago (p. 184), and which has played a role in transforming the local economy and making it dependent on an intake of women for prostitution.
- 8 Mika Toyota’s article on the social networks of the Akha caravan traders shows how their commercial activities, largely ignored by ethnographers despite their long established existence, have served to mediate changes in identity and forge inter-ethnic relations (p. 206). This study proves that anthropological research must not confine itself within the boundaries laid down by official state classifications, but must on the contrary concentrate on the strategies through which ethnic identities maintain themselves.
- 9 Formerly, other major participants in the caravan trade between China, Siam, and Burma were the Chinese Muslims from Yunnan (the *Hui*). But Jean Berlie makes the point that this ancient trade, whose routes were marked out by a network of mosques serving as both economic and religious centres (pp. 224-225), seems not to have survived the closing of the frontiers in the early 1950s, followed by the opening of the new sea routes in the early 1980s under the control of non-Muslim Chinese. But the decline in the Yunnan Muslims’ role in the cross-border trade between Yunnan and Thailand has in no way diminished the vitality of their religious observances, for these display very visible signs of a revival.
- 10 The last four chapters in the volume take us to the Sino-Vietnamese border. The question of Chinese transnational networks is examined in Chau Thi Hai’s essay on the practices of the social and economic networks which support the cross-border trade by the *Hoa* (the Sino-Vietnamese word for Vietnamese of Chinese origin), who are one of the 54 official ethnic groups comprising the Vietnamese nation. Unfortunately this essay provides little more than a repetition of the usual clichés on Chinese success. It is particularly regrettable that the writer makes no mention of the political conditions for the immigration underpinning the establishment of the transnational Chinese network, which he credits for the economic success of the *Hoa*.

- 11 Xie Guangmao takes up the existence of women's networks and demonstrates the leading role of women in the cross-border trade which is growing in the Chinese frontier village of Dongxing. This piece would probably have benefited from a parallel study of men's economic activities, and even more from a closer look at the place occupied by women within the family circle. Such an approach would have lent finer nuances to her conclusions, for these tend to reduce the social role of women to a simple matter of economic status.
- 12 Cheung Siu Woo's contribution is a very stimulating essay on the *Kinh* people of Guangxi. This is a community of Vietnamese origin, which one of the author's informants, by playing upon the multiple meanings of the Chinese term *minzu* for both ethnicity and nationality, cleverly defines as "at once the smallest and the biggest ethnic group (*minzu*) in the People's Republic of China". Considered within the setting of the Chinese nation, the *Kinh* are indeed a small minority group, but on the other hand their Vietnamese ethnicity is the basis of a transnational identity. This contribution throws particular light on how this dual identity is articulated and expressed through their cultural practices, according to whether the emphasis is on their Chinese nationality or their Vietnamese ethnicity which underpins their privileged transnational links with the other *Kinh*.
- 13 Finally, Christopher Hutton brings a linguistic perspective to bear on the major question in studies of ethnicity, which is that of ethnic classification in relation to language. We know that language practices are not the basis of ethnic distinctions but, on the contrary, that it is linguistic classification which contributes largely to official ethnic distinctions. These in turn give official sanction to ethnic entities in which language is considered to play an important part. The author studies the *Nung* people of Vietnam, who provide an outstanding example of the extremely variable linguistic categories encompassing widely differing populations.
- 14 In sum, this is a collection of essays of varying merit, but which are mostly successful in showing the actual situation in the ancient southern marches of the Chinese empire, which the fixed political borders of the modern nation states have transformed into cross-border regions. They throw light on the sites of interconnectivity and many-sided entanglements which are held together through a number of different networks: ethnic, linguistic, economic, religious, family-based, etc.