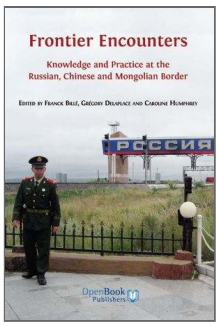

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Frontier Encounters
Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border

Open Book Publishers

11. The Persistence of the Nation-State at the Chinese-Kazakh Border

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Publisher: Open Book Publishers
Place of publication: Open Book Publishers
Year of publication: 2012
Published on OpenEdition Books: 1 June 2015
Serie: OBP collection
Electronic ISBN: 9782821854055

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Ross Anthony

Within the social sciences today there is a wide-spread understanding that boundaries are not simply lines dividing territorial and cultural entities. Studies that view ethnic boundaries and nation state boundaries as constructed (Barth 1969; Turner 1967; Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Gupta and Ferguson 1992) now contend with the assertion that states are a set of overlapping institutional practices (Sharma and Gupta 2006; Mitchell 2002). With the advent of globalisation and the discourses which sustain it, flows of capital, labour and media are viewed as re-organising the territorial dividing lines of nation-states as we know them (Appadurai 2000; Giddens 1999). Additionally, there are a variety of cultural ways (often contested) of conceptualising the notion of the border (see Bulag and Billé in this volume). Within Xinjiang, there is a considerable literature on overlapping ethnic boundaries (Bellér Hann et al. 2007) and trans-national boundary movement (Roberts 2004).

In this chapter, I will argue that while the notion of the border is indeed a multiplicity of discourses, practices and imaginaries, it simultaneously persists as a singular, unambiguous entity. Such persistence, I suggest, is due, in part, to the materials and practices that make up borders (fences, guard towers, walls, maps, check points, military patrols), but also the way that such technologies promote viewing space in a singular way. Using the accounts of several people who live in close proximity to the Chinese border with

 DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0026.11

Kazakhstan in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, I argue that the persistence of the border in absolute terms stems from the relative success of the nationalist project of spatial organisation.

Historical and theoretical considerations

The border I will be discussing covers an area of north-west Xinjiang, stretching from the Ili River Valley in the south to the Altai Mountains in the north, where the border joins up with Russia (the Altai Republic). The region has long functioned as a zone of contestation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Zhunghar Mongols ruled the region and dominated the Tarim Basin to the south. Following the fall of the Zhunghars, new Qing borders incorporated the region into China. Laura Newby notes that it was during this period that the "notion of border treaties and mapping of lines to demarcate precise territorial limits" (2005: 12) came into being. That being said, borders were often not enforced; the actual border constitutes the establishment of *karun* – guard posts positioned on routes and passes that were frequently used by travellers entering or leaving Qing territory (ibid.: 12). Still, the establishment of this frontier would have a long lasting impact on how space and identity were to be practiced and imagined. Kazakhs inhabited a somewhat liminal space: dwelling on both sides of the border, they paid allegiance to both the Qing and Tsarist Russia. Although the Kazakhs were classified as tributaries of the Qing, many were beyond their direct control. Following Qing conquest, Uyghurs were moved into the Ili River Basin area in order to form agricultural colonies. In 1871 the Ili River Valley was annexed by Russia when the Qing were driven out by a Muslim uprising led by Koqandi adventurer Yakub Beg.

By the mid twentieth century, the entire region was in revolt due to the warlordism and Han Chinese favouritism under the KMT regime (Forbes 1986). The entire border region, from the Tian Shan to Altai, rose up in revolt to form the East Turkestan Republic which lasted from 1944 to 1949 (Lias 1956; Benson 1990). When Xinjiang fell to the communists, the region re-integrated into China proper. In 1962, following the Sino-Soviet split, between 60 and 100 thousand Kazakhs and Uyghurs, escaping famine and the political purges of the Great Leap Forward, migrated across the border to the Soviet Union. The border was shut shortly after this (Millward 2007: 264). The depopulated areas were re-populated with demobilised People's Liberation Army troops from Inner China. The primary task of these soldiers, known as the *bingtuan* or the Production-Construction

Military Corps (*Shengchan jianshe bingtuan*), was to reclaim desert land, farm it and fortify the border regions (McMillen 1979). By 1955 there were 110,000 personnel assembled (Toops 2004: 246); by the 1990s the figure rose to over one million. A number of events, including the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's independence and China's economic turn, have led to the border functioning today as an area of international trade. The *bingtuan*, who own several large border-trading companies, are also heavily invested in border trade. With the rise of the market economy, this border region has also recently developed national parks, the most famous of which is the Kanas Lake Nature Reserve.

As this brief history shows, the construction of the international boundary is multiple. The border has moved place several times and has re-aligned ethnic identities. However, with the rise of the Chinese nation state in the twentieth century we see the increasing emergence, despite the "internationalism" of Socialism, of a more precisely-defined Chinese nation-state space (Dirlik 2008; Duara 1996). Benedict Anderson suggests that the pre-nation state era, in which borders were "porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another" (1991: 21) have been transformed into entities in which "state sovereignty is fully, flatly and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory" (ibid.: 19). This has necessitated a fundamental shift in the articulation of how space is divided. David Sneath *et al.* have used the term "technologies of the imagination" to refer to materials and processes that elicit various ways through which people imagine their relationship to the world. While the authors insist that any such technology is never totalised (2009: 26), it is equally true that large-scale projects, such as that of the nation state, distribute homogenising technologies in an attempt to create collectively stable imaginaries. Billig's notion of "banal nationalism" – the circulation of flags, money, turns of phrase and so on – function as important mediators through which the space of the nation is imagined (1995). One constraint such technologies exploit is a simple limit to which humans are subject: that one cannot simultaneously inhabit various places at the same time; that one is forced to imagine spaces vaster than one's perceptual horizon.

The map of the Chinese nation-state is crucial in this regard. As in most other nation states, maps of China are disseminated through books, television, stamps, propaganda posters and various other media. Although many people in China remain map illiterate, the map of China functions as much as a powerful symbol as it does an actually-existing representation of

the nation-state, taken from a vantage point several kilometres above the sky. This top-down gaze – what James C. Scott refers to as the "God's-eye view" – is impossible to comprehend while standing on the earth's surface; it is best perceived via the proxy of the map, the miniature or the aeroplane (1998: 57). For Scott, this is part and parcel of a larger modernist project which strives to produce communities that are unmbiguous and clearly legible. While this paper touches on the multiple affordances of the border in daily practice, we also see that the nationalist discourse of a single, unified, unambiguous border is equally persistent. By way of a conclusion, I argue for the continued importance of the study of the nation-state project and its continuing role in shaping the way in which people think about space.

Ethnography

In the summer of 2007 and the summer of 2008, I travelled to various places along the border of northwest Xinjiang. I travelled to the Ili River Valley, Jimunai and the Altai on both occasions. I visited several border towns and travelled up to mountainous areas near the border. Three episodes from these travels were particularly instructive.

Episode 1

During a trip into the Altai Mountains, in one of the last permanent settlements (some 35km from the Russian border and 55 km from the Kazakh border), I encountered a Han Chinese man who was born in the Altai Mountains and had lived here for most of his life. The man was married to a Mongolian woman and his brother to a Tuvan. He spoke fluent Kazakh and some Mongolian. When I met him, he and his family were living with a Kazakh household. The man would act as a tout for tourists, mostly Han Chinese from Eastern China who would be invited to stay the night in the house. But the man's real job was as a hunter. There was money to be had in the trade of fox, wolf, bear and the gathering of the high-altitude caterpillar fungus.[1] Bear paws were particularly in demand and, I was told, reached their optimal length near the end of the year, when the hunters would set out for lengthy expeditions.

1 The man informed me that caterpillar fungus (*dongchong xiacao*) could reach 17–18,000 RMB ($2,700–2,800) per kilo; a bear costs 30,000 RMB ($4,750).

In recent years, several forested river valleys in the Altai have become nature reserves and hunting such animals is now illegal. Nevertheless, hunted animal goods are still traded in the area. Businessmen from the booming Chinese medicine industry in south China purchase goods from hunters by paying bribes to the park officials. Hunting, the man told me, was a difficult, risky affair. Because he and his hunting companions carried out their expeditions in December, the snowy terrain was treacherous and the weather bitterly cold; on one occasion, a member of his hunting team froze to death.

Another risky enterprise was the crossing of the Kazakh and Mongolian borders while tracking bears. During our encounter, the hunter pointed to the mountain slopes at the head of the valley: "that is where the border is" he said, tracing his finger along a snowy ridge. Although some of the valleys had military patrols, the area was remote, lacked roads and was inaccessible in the winter. Thus, it was possible to cross the border undetected. However, it was equally possible to cross and be caught. The man revealed that he had once been captured by Kazakh officials and was forced to hand over his hunting catch in return for release. On another occasion, he was handed over to the Chinese authorities, who made him chop wood for 15 days on the Chinese side of the border as punishment. The hunter informed me that this year would be his last year of hunting. He felt he was becoming too old for such high-risk activity.

Episode 2

Another stop on my trip was the highly under-utilised border town of Jimunai. Although Jimunai aspired to be a thriving border town, the bulk of international trade was conducted in the border town of Khorgos, several hundred miles to the south in the Ili River Basin.

When I visited Jimunai in 2008, the trading area at the border was in the process of being relocated to the town itself, some 20km away. On my way to the trading area at the border, I met a Kazakh man of Chinese nationality in his early twenties who was doing contract work for the government. Every morning he would travel twenty minutes to the border where he was helping to build a new road that led to the border itself. The man told me that he had already tried to make a life for himself in the coastal provinces of China. But before he even managed to leave Xinjiang, he got bogged down in the capital city, Urumqi, where he drank all his money away. He then worked in Turpan for several months to make enough money to travel to

eastern China. He finally made his way to the Chinese north-east (*Dongbei*) where he sold kebabs on the side of the road.

This situation not being ideal, he had now returned to Jimunai, where he was working on his next project: to move to Kazakhstan to join relatives who had moved there in the 1990s. The young man informed me that they are now far more prosperous than his family in China. With government assistance, they had started up a chicken farm and now had enough money to buy tractors. He had never been to Kazakhstan but it had now become his dream to go. He explained to me that it was his hope to raise enough money building the border road so that he could enrol in a Russian language programme in Urumqi. From there he would continue on to Kazakhstan where he would join his extended family. He now faced the dilemma of how to return to Urumqi and avoid squandering his money again.

Episode 3

During this same trip to Jimunai, I attempted to visit some glacial valleys in the nearby Muzart Tagh mountain range. A portion of the range straddles the Chinese/Kazakh border. In the town itself, I began to enquire about how to access the glaciers. A local taxi driver said he could take us there the next morning. However the next morning, he arrived with bad news: it was not possible for me to visit the glaciers because the area was out of bounds to foreigners. Usually, a military friend of his who patrolled the border would allow us through the check-point. However, because the Olympic Games were only weeks away, security had become much tighter. If his army friend's superiors found out, the friend could get into trouble because the border administration was subject to inspections from higher authorities.

Later in the day, we spoke to another taxi driver who was a former Bingtuan employee. After hearing of our attempts to get to the glacier, he insisted he could take us there; he had many former colleagues working at the border. However, after a brief phone call, he returned with a similar response: "Olympics!" (*aulinhui*).

Discussion

All three of the above episodes provide evidence that the border is practiced as both multiple and singular. Because this chapter is concerned with the persistence of the singular, I will touch briefly on issues of multiplicity , before providing a more in-depth analysis of the border as a singular, abstract entity.

Regarding the first episode, we can see that the hunter is himself the product of a border region insofar as he is culturally aligned with several different ethnic groups (Mongol, Tuvan, Kazakh). By mainstream Han Chinese standards, this kind of heavily overlapping identity is increasingly rare.[2] Additionally, between his own actions, corruption on behalf of park officials and the resources of big business, the borderland activities are part of a much vaster set of practices which stretch all the way to the metropolises of Hong Kong and Shanghai. There is a phenomenological dimension present: namely that when the hunter is illegally crossing the border, he is not so much crossing an abstract line as he is immersed within a landscape in which the risks of animals, weather, border patrols and the like are all serious elements with which the hunter has to engage.

Of course, this experiential element of the border is something in which the parties of all three ethnographic episodes are engaged: their own unique interactions with the border. Regarding the young Kazakh man, this entails his daily travel to the border and his literal construction of it through his work as a builder. The man's family networks, which extend beyond the border itself and well into Kazakhstan, were another reason to negate the singularity of the border as dividing line. For the taxi-drivers, a dimension of their everyday experience of the border was ferrying travellers to and from Jimunai; as we have seen, it also occasionally involved taking tourists into the glaciated valleys along which the border ran. We can deduce from my trip to Jimunai that entry into the more sensitive of the border regions was itself a question of temporality and flexibility. The efficacy of the taxi drivers' connections with the border authorities was one which was inextricably bound to the nation's calendar of events. The tightening of the border during the Olympics indicates that the literal zone which constitutes the border, at the level of enactment, was an entity that literally expanded and contracted according to context.

However, this being said, in all three instances we also see the persistence of the border in its more traditional incarnation as a singular entity. The hunter stands out as a case in point. It appears as if it was important for him, particularly when crossing illegally, to imagine the border precisely as a singular threshold. Deep in the Altai, there were no border fences and

2 During my fieldwork in Xinjiang, interaction between Han and minorities, particularly amongst post-1990 Han migrants, was minimal (Anthony 2012). For a discussion on the complexities of boundary making between Han and non-Han in Gansu and Yunnan, see Hansen (2005).

military patrols were widely interspersed. Therefore, as he explained to me, he had to make estimations as to where the precise location of the border was. Whereas tracking a bear involved imagining its movements coupled with interpreting traces of its presence (pawed trees; fresh dung), engaging with the border entailed imagining not only the potential presence of border patrols and their locations, but also the very real, but also very abstract, line that helped determine his legality at any given moment.

Another instance in which the hunter actualised the line of the border was when he traced his finger along the mountain ridge so as to show me where the border lay. Such a gesture literally re-inscribes the abstraction of the nation-border upon the ridge of the mountain that is, in effect, the border's actually existing double. Imagining and projecting this partially imaginary line as the man recalled his forays into the border region presents an interesting inversion of Tim Ingold's categories of space as abstract and space as lived and practised. Of primary importance to Ingold is how one experiences and recalls the environment as one engages in it – not how it appears in abstract form, such as on a map. Ingold believes that peoples' accounts of moving through space (what he refers to as "mapping") take into account the importance of time as one moves through the environment. Modern maps (referred to as "mapmaking") bracket out this sense of time. He states:

> It is at the point where maps cease to be generated as by-products of story-telling, and are created instead as end-products of projects of spatial representation, that I draw the line between mapping and mapmaking. In effect, mapmaking suppresses, or 'brackets out', both the movements of people as they come and go between places (wayfinding), and the re-enactment of those movements in inscriptive gesture (mapping) (2000: 234).

But what we see in the instance of the hunter is a process of story-telling that draws on and reproduces these very "end-products of projects of spatial representation" as primary content. This suggests that even when an individual engages with the border in the dynamic way that the hunter does, it nevertheless persists as a single dividing line, akin to those drawn on maps themselves.

A similar emergence of the border as a line is also evident in the story of the young Kazakh man. In his case, it was as if the border itself had become a line of desire beyond which lay future prosperity. Whereas before, this future prosperity seemed to lie a great distance away in inner China, it now lay beyond the fence that he lived so close to. While I occasionally met nationalistic Kazakhs who believed that northern Xinjiang should be

incorporated into Kazakhstan, their nationalist aspirations were far more diluted than, say, the Uyghur population living predominantly in southern Xinjiang. I never saw, for instance, a map that claimed northern Xinjiang as part of Kazakhstan. Thus, even though the young man had reified Kazakhstan as an almost utopian dream – Chinese Kazakhs are allowed to obtain Kazakh passports – it was the line dividing these two nation-states that was the primary barrier he needed to overcome.

The border possessed a prohibiting function – he could not simply cross it. At the same time, however, the prohibition played a role in the motivation to transgress the border itself. This seemed to be the feeling of several Kazakhs I knew: the notion that Kazakhstan offered good economic prospects for them, particularly in the realm of cross-border trade where Kazakh family connections and a shared language could ease the passage of goods. If there was any irony in the young man's situation, it was the fact that his desire to transgress the dividing line was sustained through his daily work: helping the state fortify and strengthen the very barrier he wished to cross. The man's idea of the nation states of Kazakhstan and China being divided by a line most probably stems in part from the fact that this was a very simple but important element of what the border itself comprised. Thus, the series of straight fences running along the semi-desert steppe function as a technology of the imagination themselves: they invite one, with the supplementary help of maps, flags and so forth, to imagine the continuation of these very fences for thousands of kilometres beyond the immediate place in which one encounters them.

In the third ethnographic description, in which I was unable to visit the Muzart Tagh glaciers, we see the border produced abstractly in a somewhat different sense: people performing an imaginary of the exemplary border during a period of state ritual. Catherine Bell has written that ritual is essentially a "strategic mode of practice" (in Hevia 1994: 193) – that is to say, a repository of performative actions that can be drawn upon during, for instance, significant political events. The 2008 Olympic Games, with its emphasis on presenting China to the outside world as modern, unified, disciplined and welcoming, was a political ritual *par excellence*. This entailed a heavy promotion of what Borge Bakken terms "the exemplary society", (2000) in which models of ideal citizens proliferate; people are encouraged to embody and repeat these exemplars. The exemplary form, promoted in propaganda posers, books, television and so on, promotes modernity, civility, education, middle-income prosperity and a harmonious environment. In regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, it also heavily promotes

another exemplary form: multi-cultural harmony.

To sustain multi-cultural harmony was tricky even at the best of times in Xinjiang, let alone during the run-up to the Olympics. This was mainly due to government fears of Uyghur ethno-separatist attacks, which would use the international attention brought by the Olympics to publicise their causes. In fact, such anxieties were somewhat founded in truth: on 4 August 2008, the first of four attacks occurred on a military base outside Kashgar, in which 11 soldiers were killed. The next evening, in the neighbourhood of Er Dao Qiao, Urumqi, where I lived (some 1,500 km away from where the attack happened), there was a complete lock-down. By sunset, all shops were closed and armed military personnel permeated the neighbourhood. In fact, in the months before the Olympics, the usually chaotic Uyghur trading areas in the Er Dao Qiao neighbourhood were already being "harmonised". Illegal markets were closed and in their place appeared a long desk with a row of chairs upon which a number of government officials sat for months on end. Over the entire city, bags were checked as one entered and exited commercial buildings, busses, markets, mosques and temples; nearer the time of the actual Games, road blocks surrounded the entire city.

This kind of behaviour was reiterated throughout the country and was particularly noticeable at the border. In the year prior to the Olympic Games, when I had travelled up to this region for the first time, the border was more relaxed. There were few roadblocks and the contours indicating where you could and could not travel were not nearly as unambiguous. On the second trip security was far more heightened. For instance, there were far more roadblocks, some carried out by soldiers, some carried out by the police. At every check-point, each person on the bus had to pull out their identity cards for the officials to inspect.

At the Jimunai border, we read on a marble statue of an open book, of the call to "defend the frontier" (*shubian*) and of "protecting", or even "pacifying the frontier" (*zheng guomen*). This call to alertness was embodied during the Olympics through the breaking down of the usual informal relationships (*guanxi*) that structure Chinese social life (in this case, the connections between the border guards and the taxi drivers). This was bound to the promotion of a hyper-vigilance, which was itself tied to the idea of being seen to be performing one's official duties. Those in charge of monitoring were, most likely, themselves subject to inspections from other institutional entities. Thus, the construction of the border during the Olympics period was sustained through a mixture of coercive and ritual means.

In the analysis of these three examples, we see how the idea of borders as singular persists and that such persistence is due in large part to material forms and their subsequent embodiment by the populace. This is not to say, however, that such material structures are themselves not subject to multiple types of interpretation. We saw, for instance, how the border meant very different things for the three informants discussed in this paper (danger, hope and employment security). Nevertheless, we simultaneously see how a common theme – namely a line that divides space – structures the narratives of the three accounts. Caroline Humphrey has argued that the materials that constituted infrastructure within the Soviet Union, such as Socialist living spaces were, on the one hand, ideology embedded in material form. On the other hand, the ways in which people understood and interpreted such forms were bound up with personal ambitions, often refracting "outwards to the very horizon of the ideologized imagination" (43: 2005). Here we see how the play of multiplicity is underscored by a common feature: the ubiquitous and highly repetitive space of the Soviet dormitory that grounded and offered a sense of commonality to the various personalised memories of such spaces. Similarly, technologies of border control, many of which are external to human subjectivity, serve to anchor people's imaginations of the vaster spaces within which they are immersed.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how the border as singular and abstract persists in the way that people engage with international boundaries. This is due in part to the proliferation of nationalist symbolism, which persuades people to imagine large-scale spaces. But it is also due to the material nature of borders. Fences and walls that constitute borders effectively attempt to trace abstractions themselves. Thus they function almost as if they were actual abstractions existing in reality. We also saw how people imagine and embody the border as part of a larger imaginary of the idealised nation state. This involves not only imagining idealisations of territorial integrity, but also their enactment and embodiment.

The three cases highlight ways of imagining and practicing the border which are wide-spread within China and beyond. While we might think that people living close to borders would interpret them in fluid and flexible ways – and in many senses, they do – we see here how equally they think of them in quite an unambiguous fashion. While each encounter

with the border is structured by its own unique conditions, each encounter is also informed by pre-existing models of what the border ought to look like. There is an overlap between the way space is thought about within nationalist discourses and the way it is thought about by individual border-dwelling people.