Su-Ann Oh (ed.)

Myanmar's Mountains and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary Making and Figured World. Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2016, xx + 398 pp., ISBN 9789814695763, price: USD 45.90 (paperback).

Describing Myanmar's war-torn peripheries Martin Smith used the image of a chess board where different shades represented different zones and levels of control: black areas belonged to the insurgent groups, white areas were controlled by the government, and brown areas were disputed by both parties (1999: 259). Almost two decades after Smith's visualization of Myanmar's conflict landscape, as the country journeys through its nascent democratization process, comes this important volume edited by Su-Ann Oh attempting to capture the diversity and complexity of Myanmar's heterogeneous border regions (including maritime boundaries) and their impact on 'local and national politics' (p. 1). This is a daunting task, no doubt, and the book skillfully accomplishes that through an expansive research coverage that includes under represented topics (maritime frontiers), case studies on local practices of peripheral ethnic groups (Rakhine spirit cult, cross-border mule caravan networks, Tai Buddhist rituals) as well as broad commentaries on electoral politics (Farrelly) and development challenges (Grundy-Warr and Chin Wei Jun, Hortsman, Dean).

The book opens with two overview pieces illuminating the salience of borderland constituencies and maritime frontiers in national political calculations 'during the current period of flux and uncertainty' (p. 43). Nicholas Farrelly in his chapter aptly summarizes the complexities of democratization and electoral expansion in Myanmar's troubled borderland constituencies. Farrelly's insights into 'borderland transformations', meaning that the borders are undergoing an 'incremental integration as part of national political system' (p. 49), is also indicative of how the changed political landscape under an elected government may provide new opportunities to the hitherto disenfranchised groups to renegotiate their political position. Maung Aye Myoe's rich and informative account detailing the political economy of the maritime resources as well as the challenges faced by the country's maritime frontiers is an important addition to an under researched area of Myanmar studies.

The subsequent three articles provide studies on the notions of belonging and territoriality as maintained between ethnic communities. Maxime Boutry shows how the Burman hegemonic identity was successfully stretched beyond the deltaic 'rice frontier' in Ayeyarwady and expanded to the Myeik Archipelago with Burman settlers marrying the indigenous Moken women and establishing a Burman appropriation of territory through building pagodas and

schools in the area. Alexandra de Mersan explores how the Buddhist Rakhine identity was consolidated during the colonial period through a process of 'ethnification' resulting in the marginalization of foreigners (*Kala*) in the Rakhine territory. By using an unusual optic of analyzing rituals around spirit cults or *nats*, de Mersan shows that the *Kala* exonym was not always used pejoratively but only to denote the foreign origin of the bearer—be it a *nat* or a human. However, with the development of Rakhine nationalism over time this local category of 'otherizing' became the most prominent tool of exclusion of the Muslim Rohingyas by the Buddhist Rakhine. Complementing De Mersan's argument, Bjornberg's excellent analysis of the lived status of the Rohingya straddling across the Bangladesh-Myanmar border further demonstrates how both Myanmar and Bangladesh have sought to delegitimize the presence of Rohingyas as part of their respective nation-building projects.

The next set of chapters focus on peoples' movements and the development of a borderland humanitarian economy along the Thai-Myanmar border. Alexander Hortsman's mapping of the humanitarian networks along this border and their extensive social rebuilding work among the conflict trodden Karen population show how alternative or 'parallel' government structures emerge within migrant communities in the face of state exclusion. He argues that in the Thai-Burmese borderland, humanitarianism has taken over public services as the state machinery associated with providing health and education and supporting economic activities has largely collapsed. Building on this theory, Suu-Ann Oh's chapter competently delineates the conditions of convergence of the disparate Thai neoliberal economy and the Burmese humanitarian economy as refugees, humanitarian organizations, social support networks, and local businesses interact with each other.

The notion of mobility over space (both physical and virtual) and time is explored in the next section of the volume. Karin Dean in her chapter explores the 'remarkable transformation' that the Kachin has undergone through constant negotiation and re-organization of the 'Kachin' identity over space (from Himalayan foothill tribes to citizens of three independent nations) and time (from "pre-Kachin" period to modern time) in order to be 'capable' of adapting to the changing spatial dynamics as well as political, social, and economic conditions. Jianxiong Ma and Cunzhao Ma's detailed case study on cross-border mule caravan networks in Kachin and Yunnan frontiers further extends this notion of mobility.

The second to last section of the volume considers the issues of displacement, memory making, and identity construction among the refugee and exiled population through individual case studies on Karen (Tangseefa), Rohingya (Farzana), Shan (Jirattikorn) and Karenni (Grundy-Warr and Chin Wei Jun)

displaced groups along the Myanmar-Thailand and Myanmar-Bangladesh borders. Both Tangseefa and Farzana use artistic expressions and cultural artifacts such as poems and drawings by refugees living in camps to analyze the process of identity formation. Whereas Grundy-Warr and Chin Wei Jun explore the notion of '[developmental] freedom's possibilities' in the post-conflict ceasefire zones of Kayah-Mae Hong Son borderland and detail how the changing political and economic conditions affect the displaced Karenni. Their chapter is also a fascinating commentary on the complex development landscape of Myanmar where a myriad of actors such as the Army, civilians, displaced ethnic population, community leaders, insurgents, local elites, and foreign investors are constantly competing for access, benefits, ownership, and rights.

The book concludes with two final case studies on Chin and Tai ethnic communities. Son and Singh in their contribution outline a sobering account of the frayed relations between the Chin and the Mizo in the Indo-Burmese frontier and the 'institutionalized xenophobia' that the persecuted Chin face from their ethnic "brethren" across the border. The final chapter by Takahiro Kojima explores how local Theravada Buddhist practices of the Tai people were revived and reinstated (albeit in a modified form) in southwest China (Yunnan) by Burmese monks who migrated to the province crossing the China-Myanmar border after the Cultural Revolution. More importantly both these chapters are excellent examples of detailed fine-grained ground-up studies of arguably under researched ethnic communities and thus contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the borderland dynamics.

Collectively the chapters in this volume demonstrate that borderscapes are often zones of their own rules and the national project of border making devised from the center collapses, at times, when faced with the lived realities of the borderland population. One way to understand, and eventually improve, the disconnect between the periphery and the center, as Oh outlines in the introductory chapter, is to 'examine the patterns, trends, anomalies and contradictions emerging in the different border areas so as to obtain insights and pose questions' (p. 19). To that end this edited volume is an impressive achievement.

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Reference

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