Yuk-Wah Chan


Yuk-Wah Chan’s study comes at a particularly relevant moment that has seen the recurrent conflict between Vietnam and China over South China Sea sovereignty intensifying for the last two years without meaningful compromise on either side. It provides an insightful reminder of the necessity to observe, understand and analyse how diplomacy is regarded and practised at the ground level. It shows how the actual key actors of the Sino-Vietnamese neighbourhood cope with limitation on their daily activities to sustain an active cooperation despite political discrepancies, and to maintain “normalcy”.

Resulting from a decade of fieldwork and research in Lào Cai, a border town on the north-west Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, among traders and tourists, Yuk-Wah Chan’s contribution to the field of border studies provides an innovative perspective on the practice of neighbourhood under a new economic order. With a convincing acuity and a great sense of observation and interpretation of the variety of interactions that are characteristic of borderlands, she covers the essential spectrum of the locals’ lives and social issues, and analyses the constant challenge that the Sino-Vietnamese tumultuous history imposes on the current development of economic cooperation.

Each of the book’s five main chapters focuses on one “surface of interactions” between Chinese and Vietnamese people at the border, and shows how they intertwine with each other. To begin with, the author develops an interesting analysis of the somehow artificially maintained normalcy between the two states by interpreting their political rhetoric as the result of a “strategy of silence”. At least at the diplomatic level, “language power” allows an assumingly weak Vietnam to stabilise its relationship with China by praising brotherhood and avoiding historical sensitivities, in an attempt to emphasise positive intimacy and the perspective of sustainable cooperation. However, Chan also points out how all other spheres that articulate discourses of distrust about China contradict what the diplomatic rhetoric wishes to emphasise, ending in blurring the picture of borderlanders’ relationships.

In her following chapter on trade and cultural economy in the borderlands, the author tries to examine ground-level diplomacy, as shaped by the nature of border business management. Firstly, Chan reminds us how Chinese economic influence in Southeast Asia is the result of historical conditions, rather than cultural affinities with its neighbours. She also reminds readers that Chinese people in this vast region are not a homogenous community on which one can
draw hasty conclusions. Drawing on a very enlightening ethnography and vivid narratives, the author describes the ambiguity of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship on the ground level, where she has captured how “Chinese businesspeople have to create their own survival packages as well as ‘ground-level diplomacy’ in order to deal with the complex world of familiarity, business-state relation and relation politics in the Vietnam-China borderlands” (p. 58). This is how she then introduces the concept of the “economy of familiarity”, a local version and subtle level of guanxi [connections] economy, an already well-studied concept in the field of Chinese studies. She attempts to demystify the magic of guanxi by describing its obscure aspects, such as extortion and clientelism, throughout the practices she observed among the mixed business community in Lào Cai.

When documenting the importance of social representations in the shaping of Sino-Vietnamese relationships at the ground level, Chan provides some explanation to the lack of trust in building sustainable relationships among cross-border traders, a recurrent issue that emerges from local narratives. She shows how personal failures and misfortunes are easily explained by blaming “the unscrupulous cultural ‘other’ across the border” (p. 60), stereotyped in such a way that it becomes a convenient explanation.

Chan also examines interactions between Chinese and Vietnamese in the context of border tourism. She describes the “interactive strategies” employed to avoid conflicts and to maintain the illusion of an accommodating neighbourhood. She takes as a research target the cohort of Chinese tourists who cross the border each year for a short visit to Vietnam. Exploring the common gazes that Vietnamese and Chinese cast on each other, Chan discovers that the latter’s depreciation of Vietnam’s level of development and culture shapes their general feeling toward their Vietnamese “brothers”, contrasting with the official rhetoric that praises them as obvious economic partners. She underlines how the gap between official representations constructed against a reinterpreted history, as well as ground-level perceptions that produce stereotypes, shape an ambiguous framework for people’s relationships.

Later, in her demonstration, Chan describes the interconnection between state regulatory systems and alternative forms of regulations. She shows how state agendas regarding border trade, far from being static, must adjust to practices and sometimes improvisations by many different actors—state agents and commercial actors—who all play specific parts in the dynamics and operations of the border economy. The last section of the book explores in a more ethnographic way private interactions between Chinese and Vietnamese through the issues of sex tourism—Vietnamese sex workers in China—and cross-border marriage. Showing how economic and gender politics remain