The book is a collection of essays on the international, political, mental and economic concepts of borders in East Asia, and some of the cases included demonstrate how broad, instrumental and fuzzy this concept of frontier necessarily is. The border may be a river, a line, an area, the sea, and it changes according to the times and the political situation. The various contributions offer a clear and detailed image of various meanings of border and frontier around the Chinese Empire, providing a more realistic and concrete perception of the international relations in that area. Furthermore, some articles also shed light on the imaginary and symbolic value of borders and their ritualistic role, both in their functions of separation and interaction, clash and contiguity.

The essays in this volume, with the exception of the first two contributions, concern the Ming and Qing dynasties. Only Christian Lamoroux’s “Geography and Politics: The Song-Liao Border Dispute of 1074/75” and Johannes L. Kurz’s “The Yangzi in the Negotiations between the Southern Tang and Its Northern Neighbours (Mid-Tenth Century)” describe disputes of “internal” boundaries between sovereign states inhabited by people of Chinese cultural orientation in earlier times.

Marion Eggert’s “A Borderline Case: Korean Travelers’ Views of the Chinese Border (Eighteenth to Nineteenth Century)” is a well documented essay based on Chinese and especially Korean sources, such as Paektu-san yurok (1764) by Pak Chong; Yu Paektu-san ki (1766) by Sô Myôngông, Sôhae yǒ ’on by Yi Tôngmu and many others. This article not only discusses the different kinds of borders between the Empire and its tributary kingdom, but also singles out some ideas held by Korean diplomatic travellers. The author also shows how differently the sea dividing the two countries could be seen by each side. In the Chinese eyes it was a very small channel, easily crossed; but in the Koreans’ mind the sea was seen as a dangerous route, as it was widely used for Chinese intrusion.

Morris Rossabi analyses Ming interest in central Asia and control of Hami, in “Ming Foreign Policy: The Case of Hami”, emphasising both commercial advantages and the Mongol legacy of the pragmatic policy of
defence. The “realistic” approach makes Hami a peculiar case of Ming foreign policy because, considering it as a gateway to the Western regions, Yongle understood that it could “serve as a buffer zone, heightening China’s security”. Therefore, a group of experts and trained specialists was formed to provide the court with clear information about the area.

The ideology which legitimises the Empire’s war machine is examined in the two contributions by Gudula Linck and Geoff Wade, which use two different sources respectively, poetry and historiography. Gudula Linck’s “Visions of the Border in Chinese Frontier Poetry” must be appreciated as an acute historical essay that explores emotions and the mind, using poetry as an historical source. This article deals with stereotypes and mental images concerning the “barbarians” which were common to the Chinese living in border areas (especially the northern borderlands). The author points out how even the ancient genre of frontier poems (bianzaishi 邊塞詩) expresses feelings about outsiders and the superiority of Chinese civilisation, against a background of long wars, and frightening ecological settings or beautiful landscapes. The sinocentric world order is seen from a critical point of view by Geoff Wade. He presents three different categories of topos: the first related to the Empire; the second to non-Chinese peoples, often seen as non-human; the third to the relations between these two. In his article “Some Topoi in Southern Border Historiography During the Ming (And Their Modern Relevance)”, he uncovers the use of force and violence behind the rhetoric and ideological theories.

Religion as instrumentum regni, through a flexible strategy which took into account different populations and customs (yin su er zhi 因俗而治), is the Qing policy vis-à-vis Tibetan Lamaist Church, as illustrated by Sabine Dabringhaus in “Chinese Emperors and Tibetan Monks: Religion as an Instrument of Rule”. Roderich Ptak, in “Die Paracel- und Spratly-Inseln in Sung, Yuan und frühen Ming-Texten: Ein maritimes Grenzgebiet?”, demonstrates the lack of historical basis for modern Chinese claims that Paracel and Spratly Islands formed part of Chinese territory during the Song, Yuan and Ming periods, discussing even their incorporation into the framework of frontier terminology. Centered on the failed British occupation of Macao in 1808, António Graça de Abreu’s article demonstrates that this episode was mostly a domestic European conflict projected onto the Chinese coast, rather than a frontier problem of the Chinese Empire.