

SPECIAL SECTION ON ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARIES OF CHINA AND
SOUTHEAST ASIA IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS**Imagined borderlands: Terrain, technology
and trade in the making and managing of
the China-Myanmar border**Alessandro Rippa^{1,2} ¹Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany²Tallinn University, EstoniaCorrespondence: Alessandro Rippa (email: alessandro.rippa@rcc.lmu.de)

Building on a 'biographical' approach to national boundaries, this paper traces the history of the China-Myanmar border—its formations, disappearances and rematerializations. In doing so, it identifies three alternative imaginaries that have characterized and shaped these borderlands throughout the past one and a half century. These imaginaries—terrain, technology and trade—sketch out some of the ways in which borderlands are seen, perceived and therefore acted upon by state authorities and powerful outsiders. They are central to how the boundary was demarcated, and to how it is managed today. These imaginaries, then, are reflected into specific practices—and thus have direct impact on everyday life along the China-Myanmar border. Drawing on both archival and long-term ethnographic research, this paper thus sheds light on the embedded processes of anticipation that underscore how the borderlands are envisioned today in dominant narratives centred around Belt and Road promises and fears.

Keywords: border studies, China, Burma/Myanmar, trade**Accepted:** 16 December 2021**Introduction**

The town of Wanding lies on the Chinese side of the current China-Myanmar boundary, along the famous Burma Road: a major infrastructure built by the Allies during WW2 to counter Japanese advancements and supply the Chinese Nationalist Army (KMT) in Yunnan. The old border bridge, built by US forces during the war over the small Wanding river is still standing today, and lies beside a more recent one made of concrete used by trucks and cars. Nearby, a small museum that recounts the history of the Burma Road and of the anti-Japanese war effort attracts regular tourists and Party officials on tour. Only a short walk from the bridge and the museum, along the Wanding river, lies one of the border pillars (no. 90) erected in 1993. Such pillars, like some of the main border crossings (*kouan*) between China and its land neighbours, have become in recent years the object of dedicated tourist visits: what is colloquially known as *kouan xin* (口岸行), or 'border-crossing travel'. Alas, during a visit to the Wanding border crossing in 2015, a small group of tourists from northern China was busy snapping pictures beside the old bridge as well as the border pillar. Not far from the tourists, over the course of some ten minutes, I saw at least a dozen people crossing the border river—barefoot, carrying their flip flops in their hands.

This scene was unsurprising. The 2185-km-long China-Myanmar border is for virtually its entirety characterized by a thick forest cover and hilly or mountainous terrain.

The actual border between the two countries remains largely invisible, and hundreds of dirt roads cross the line that separates them. Locals often have families on both sides of the borders, Myanmar children attend Chinese school, and crossing is hardly a problem. For them, documents are hardly required and inspections are largely perfunctory. At the same time, while sitting on a small bench near the Wanding border pillar observing men, women and children crossing the border-river, I was also highly aware of the *violent* nature of this particular border, of its colonial history, and of how it continues to perpetuate injustices and inequalities. Not too far from where I was standing, thousands of Kachins were living in internally displaced people (IDP) camps. Some Lisu families I had met only a few weeks before, were stranded in proximity to the Chinese borders without any official papers. Perhaps, I thought, the scene I was witnessing was ultimately misleading—projecting an image of smooth cross-border linkages, while hiding the inherent violence and unjustness that characterize national borders.

While perhaps misleading, the scene nevertheless offers a partial—yet crucial—window into the state of broader bilateral ties between China and Burma/Myanmar,¹ and lends itself to an inquiry into long-standing trans-national relations and how they both shape and are shaped by everyday practices. In conversation with the overall theme of this special section, this paper then attempts to unpack some of the alternative geographies of China-Southeast Asia relations over time, and thus examines how they are mediated by cultural, environmental and political geographies on the ground (cf. Gregory, 1994; Sparke *et al.*, 2004). The point of departure for this inquiry is the understanding that the history of these borderlands, as well as the tropes through which such borderlands have been and are imagined and portrayed, inform in crucial ways how Belt and Road projects are today planned and implemented, but also perceived and anticipated on the ground. Hence, I argue in the first part of the paper, an historical approach to borderlands needs to be paired with an analysis of current developmental dynamics, as well as future-oriented politics of anticipation.

In recent decades, to be sure, the growing field of border studies has sought to account for the changing and historically contingent nature of national borders, most notably by addressing them as social *processes* of ‘bordering’ (cf. Paasi, 1999; van Houtum & Naerssen, 2002; Newman, 2001; Pfoser, 2020). In close conversation with such approaches, geographer Nick Megoran (2012; 2017) developed a ‘biographical’ approach to international boundaries, shedding light on how boundaries *materialize*, *rematerialize* and *dematerialize*—that is, how they appear, change, reappear and become more or less significant over time. Importantly, this approach ‘illuminates how international boundaries are *both* produced by and produce social life’ (Megoran, 2012: 468, emphasis mine). According to Megoran, such biographical writing about the boundary needs to be three-dimensional: a) temporal: to reveal that the boundary is historically constituted; b) spatial: to connect the line on the map with its embodiment across the land; and c) ecological: to illustrate its entanglements with the other bodies it collides with and the environment it reconfigures through the imposition of its infrastructure.

In this article, I draw on Megoran’s ‘biographical’ approach to trace the history of the China-Myanmar border—its formations, disappearances and rematerializations. In doing so, I identify three alternative imaginaries that have characterized and shaped these borderlands throughout the past one and a half century: terrain, technology and trade. These three imaginaries speak to how the borderlands are, and have been, depicted as a remote and unruly place to be tamed, to the need for centres of power to control trans-national mobilities of people and goods, and to the wish to transform this imagined periphery into a key connection between economic and political centres.

These imaginaries are neither exhaustive nor exclusive, yet they sketch out some of the ways in which borderlands are seen, perceived and therefore acted upon by state authorities and powerful outsiders. They are central to how the boundary was demarcated and to how it is managed today. Crucially, this approach sheds additional light on the embedded processes of *anticipation* that underscore how the borderlands are currently envisioned. The latter point, my main contribution to Megoran's biographical approach, addresses the promises (of development, connectivity and modernization) reflected by many China-led infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia today—a reality that calls for grounded analyses of envisioned futures (cf. Lin & Grundy-Warr, 2012).

Such theoretical approach is reflected in the paper's underlying methodology: drawing on both archival and ethnographic research, the latter conducted for the most part in the border areas of Tengchong-Myitkyina and Ruili-Muse between 2015–19 (Figure 1). Archival research was conducted in London at the British Library Archives and the National Archives, with a particular focus on how the border was both imagined and managed by British authorities in the colonial phase. Additionally, dozens of travelogue and memoirs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were collected and consulted. Interviews and ethnographic research were conducted in Myitkyina, Waingmaw, and Putao in Kachin State (Myanmar), and Yingjiang, Tengchong county in Yunnan Province (PRC). In the Ruili area, most of the research was carried out with cross-border traders, migrants, retailers, and tour guides at the Border Economic Development Zone in Jiegao, as well as in Wanding. Additionally, as part of an ongoing visual project, I conducted over a dozen in-depth interviews with former members of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), now scattered between China, Myanmar, and Thailand. Such interviews were carried out, in particular, in Tengchong, Ruili, Kunming, Mandalay, Panghsang, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sai. Additionally, several field trips were taken at the Houqiao, Diantan, Zizhi, and Laiza border crossings. In Tengchong I also interviewed local officials involved with cross-border affairs, and local historians researching various aspects of the area's recent past. Such interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, Burmese and Kachin, often with the crucial help of local interpreters and research assistants. Their experiences were crucial in sophisticating my understanding of lived realities in these borderlands.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part expands on Megoran's approach to borderlands by addressing the literature on anticipation, thus laying out the paper's main theoretical contribution to border studies. The second part will briefly adopt a biographical approach to the China-Myanmar border by focusing on three particular moments: how the border first materialized (through colonialism), de-materialized (in a phase of China-sponsored insurgency), and re-materialized (amidst promises of cross-border trade and development). This section, while showing the importance of a biographical approach, also functions as an introduction to the history of this particular boundary. The third part of the paper will further explore three recurrent imaginaries—terrain, technology and trade—that help to shed light on how the China-Myanmar border has been made and managed over the past 150 years.

Border biographies and anticipatory geographies

The Belt and Road is but the last of a series of ambitious initiatives set to transform China-Southeast Asian borderlands into key sites of globalized economic activities. While the region presents a rich history of both local and long-distance trade (Giersch, 2006; Summers, 2013), these initiatives tend to foreground not-yet-built infrastructural projects rather than existing networks of exchange. As Andrew



Figure 1. Northern section of the China-Myanmar borderlands.

Source: Map produced by Reuben Wang.

Walker (1999) compellingly showed in his work on the Upper Mekong Economic Quadrangle, and as I (Rippa, 2020b) have previously argued in the case of borderland infrastructure at the Yunnan-Kachin interface, such large-scale developments are often

indeed detrimental to local trading networks and practices. Nevertheless, infrastructural projects remain largely positively viewed, by both local actors and state authorities (Jonsson, 2014), and the *promises* of development embedded by such projects are widely anticipated in spite of repeated and recurrent failures (Harvey & Knox, 2012). The Belt and Road thus looms large across Southeast Asian borderlands today as a highly ambiguous (non)presence—anticipated and feared, both imagined and real.

My point of departure for this paper suggests that in order to understand how such an ambitious initiative is perceived at the China-Myanmar borderlands today, we need to trace its history, without losing sight of how these borderlands have been both established and managed, as well as imagined. In tracing the biography of the China-Myanmar border, this paper thus attempts to answer two broader questions, speaking to disciplinary and regional studies debates. These are: what does anticipation add to our understandings of border biographies, and how? And secondly, by examining anticipation as a logic that shapes borderland dynamics, what do we learn about China-Southeast Asia relations?

As mentioned in the introduction, the notion of border biography is inspired by the work of Nick Megoran on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan boundary. In *Nationalism in Central Asia* (Megoran, 2017), Megoran convincingly shows how boundaries are not just 'out there'—they are rather *made*, and 'they do things' (Megoran, 2017: 4, original emphasis). Reconstructing their history, then, is inextricably bound to an ethnographic attention to their present functions, and to how they are performed and represented in everyday practices (Loong *et al.*, 2019). Megoran's work is thus one of few to account for the temporal dimensions of national borders—a topic that has been largely neglected in the field of border studies (Pfoser, 2020). Importantly, Megoran's approach does not imply *linearity* in the study of a particular national border, rather, it allows for returns and repetitions. This aspect is particularly relevant in the case I analyse in this paper, as the China-Myanmar boundary while certainly contingent to particular historical phases (from colonialism to the Cold War, for instance), displays persistent characteristics and returning patterns. These patterns, that I capture through three particular imaginaries, are also relevant to how the border is experienced today and to how the impact of China-led infrastructural development on the area is anticipated.

To account for these complexities, the aim of this paper is to pair Megoran's biographical approach with an analysis of future-oriented border politics at the China-Myanmar interface. Drawing on work by Matthew Sparke (1998; 2000) I term such future-oriented practices 'anticipatory geographies': state-driven initiatives promoting trans-national economic hope through the language of prosperity, mutual benefit and connectivity. As Henryk Szadziewski (2020) recently argued, the Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies such understanding of anticipatory geography, bound as it is to largely nationalist narratives of Sino-centric, yet inclusive, economic development (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Sidaway & Woon, 2017). Importantly, anticipatory geographies cross international boundaries and thus re-configure not only sovereign spaces, but also local environments and identities. Importantly, while such anticipatory geographies often employ the abstract language of global connectivity, and resort to geometrical simplifications such as economic corridors and growth quadrangle (Rippa, 2020a), in both their planning and implementation, they remain bound up in the histories and politics of specific localities. An approach grounded in both historical and ethnographic research is thus necessary to understand how anticipatory geographies play out 'on the ground' (Oliveira *et al.*, 2020).

In doing so, this paper lays out three imaginaries that cut through both the past, present and futures of the China-Myanmar borderlands, thus tying Megoran's biographical approach with an analysis of anticipatory geographies in the region. The first imaginary, *terrain*, refers to how, from the perspective of imperial as well as modern postcolonial nation states, Southeast Asian borderlands have often been deemed 'unruly' and 'wild', and thus been the targets of projects of modernization, development and 'improvement' (Li, 2007). *Technology* encompasses the ways in which authorities envision this project of modernization to take place—namely, by making the borderlands and its people legible. *Trade*, lastly, reflects deep-rooted aspirations to transform this imagined periphery into a key connection between economic and political centers—a key aspect of current Sino-centric anticipatory geographies. To be sure, by calling these 'imaginaries' I do not aim to downplay the reality of the challenging mountainous terrain that characterize the China-Myanmar borderlands, of intrusive and often discriminating surveillance technologies, and the presence of changing trade routes, trading communities and exchange centres. Imagined, indeed, does not mean false, or made up—rather, it refers to how deep-rooted images and discourses have created these particular perceptions of the China-Myanmar borderlands (Gregory, 1994). In turn, I argue, such imaginaries inform how Sino-centric anticipatory geographies are both centrally planned and locally perceived today, and thus must form a crucial element in our understanding of Belt and Road on the ground.

In teasing out these three imaginaries, I draw on both archival and ethnographic sources, and contribute to critical literature on the China-Myanmar borderlands that has emerged over the past two decades. This has largely focused on how Myanmar's frontier status affected local populations, creating both the conditions and justifications for violent extraction and exploitation. Work by Karin Dean (2005), for instance, elucidates the 'rebel' Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) as a popularly legitimate government, thus complicating state-centric narratives. Addressing the case of the Kokang borderlands, further to the south, Hu and Konrad (2018) explicitly address how the China-Myanmar interface can reveal multi-scalar geopolitics beyond national components. Here, borders are utilized creatively by multiple actors, and ultimately cut across localized and globalized dynamics. Critically addressing the trans-national aspect of disempowered development in northern Myanmar, Kevin Woods (2011; 2019) traces how China's current agribusiness investments in Kachin state have reconfigured the borderland's legacy of political violence while realigning armed sovereignties closer towards the Myanmar's military. The trans-national components of Myanmar's ethnic conflicts in the borderlands are also a key part of Laur Kiik's (2016) work on the Myitstone dam, a prominent Chinese project which was met with fierce resistance by the Kachin public. Cutting through local, national and trans-national scales, and speaking to different understandings of 'modernity' and 'development', the Myitstone case shows how memories of Chinese engagements in northern Myanmar affect its current and future infrastructure plans. This latter point, in particular, is crucial to this article's approach: bringing in explicit dialogue the borderlands' (imagined) past, and its aspirational futures.

The China-Myanmar border: a short biography

1885–1961: Border demarcation

If 'the planet is bordered because it was bordered by colonialism' (E-flux, 2020), then any biography of modern boundaries needs to acknowledge and reflect on how boundary-making was paired with, and rested upon, the seizure of indigenous land and the separation of the 'savage' and the 'civilized', the 'raw' and the 'cooked', the

‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’. Such starting points in thinking about international boundaries are certainly apt for the case of the border between Myanmar and China’s Yunnan Province. Due to its rugged topography and distance from early centres of economic, political and cultural activities, Yunnan has often been described—by the Yunnanese themselves and to this very day—as a peripheral, under-developed frontier. Northern Myanmar, alas, in both colonial-era sources and contemporary popular depictions in Chinese and Western media, remains often known as a land of restless tribes, vices and unspoiled resources (Rippa & Saxer, 2016). While both regions entertained early relations with neighbouring states and empires, and Yunnan was incorporated into a province of the empire by the Yuan (1273–1368) and then Ming (1368–1644) dynasties; they remained for the most part ruled by indigenous leaders (known as *tusi* 土司 by the Qing). Writing about the Yunnanese side of the frontier, Giersch thus claims that, not unlike the centuries that preceded it, ‘the nineteenth-century Southwest [of the Qing empire] was, in both the experiences of daily life and the minds of its rulers, a patchwork of diverse communities ruled through a variety of specially tailored institution’ (Giersch, 2020: 14). As part of this complexity and approach to governance, the precise location of the boundary was subjected to the Qing’s court relations with the many polities controlling this territory. This means that borders remained porous and indiscernible, and frontier communities subjected to multiple sovereignties.

Much of this would change in the late nineteenth century, when, to use Megoran’s terminology, the China-Myanmar border *materialized* through a particular colonial encounter: that between the British and the Qing empires. This particular process occurred chiefly through attempts at demarcation, carried out by the respective authorities through a number of high-profile treaties, as well as on-the-ground surveys (Edwards, 2005; Bussche, 2014). Furthermore, the demarcation of the imperial frontier entailed ethnographic efforts to survey and categorize frontier communities and languages reflecting the principles of ‘simplification’ and ‘legibility’ that underscore modern governance (Giersch, 2020: 14; Scott, 1998).

Following the British invasion and annexation of upper Burma in 1885–6, British control was recognized by the Qing in the Sino-British Convention on Burma in 1886. This was also the first instance in which the issue of the boundary between the two countries was formally raised, as the 1886 treaty included a British demand for a committee—the Burma-China Frontier Delimitation Commission—to establish a boundary. However, repeated negotiations between British and Qing officials failed to agree upon the final shape of the border. While the Burma Convention of 1894 laid the foundation for the main line of the China-Myanmar boundary, by the fall of the Qing in 1911, there were still sections of the boundary that remained un-delimited. The peculiar topography, ethnic composition, and history of the areas complicated any attempt at an agreement, as did different understandings of the nature of sovereignty between British and Qing authorities (McGrath, 2003: 10).

Yet while the boundary issue between China and Myanmar would not be solved until 1961, efforts to demarcate the border between the Qing empire (and later Nationalist China until the CCP takeover in 1949) and the British empire materialized for borderland communities at particular times. Of significance was a provision to the 1886 Sino-British Convention on Myanmar which allowed the establishment of British consulates in Yunnan—namely in Simao (Pu’er), Kunming and Tengchong (then known as Tengyue or Tengyueh; cf. Nield, 2015). The Tengyue consulate is particularly noteworthy here, as it played a crucial role in trans-national and border disputes, due to its location along the

main trading route with Burma and proximity to the border. British consuls in Tengyue were acting as ‘legal mediators’ (Whewell, 2019) with their Chinese and Burmese counterparts in various disputes concerning ‘Burma cases’, particularly in the context of annual ‘frontier meetings’. The main objective of such meetings was to resolve, as smoothly as possible, any ‘trans-frontier’ disputes involving local ethnic groups, mainly Shan, Lisu and Kachin, in agreement with Chinese frontier officers. Furthermore, in such meetings ‘consuls tactfully asserted and protected British sovereign claims to land, people, and resources in certain disputed areas’ (Whewell, 2019: 117).

The British consulate in Tengchong was eventually closed in 1942, and as WW2 came to an end and the civil war in China gave way to the formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the issue of the Sino-Burmese boundary resurfaced only in the 1950s. On the Chinese side, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was, at least initially, largely in charge of the development of basic infrastructure and of the distribution of staple goods to minority groups (Moseley, 1973: 107). Yet despite the deployment of PLA troops at the frontier regions, in this initial phase, the communist takeover appeared to have had little impact on cross-border mobilities. According to my interviews in Tengchong and Ruili, locals could move across national boundaries without too much hassle, while communities living in proximity to the border were, for the most part, left alone. This particular freedom was remarked on in the course of official friendship celebrations between the two countries. For instance, in 1956, at a high-level meeting in Mangshi, on the China-Burma border, reminiscent of colonial-era ‘frontier meetings’, local participants reportedly ‘expressed the hope that the anticipated demarcation of the border would not prevent continued coming and going across the frontier’ (Moseley 1973: 165).

Rematerializations of the boundary occurred in this phase through attempts at demarcation as well as through military actions, particularly the PLA’s attempt to crash remaining Nationalist troops that, alongside thousands of other Yunnanese (Chang, 2014: 5), had taken refuge in northern Burma after their defeat in 1949. In early 1960, Zhou Enlai settled the border issue with Burmese Prime Minister Ne Win, while at the same time securing support for joint operations against KMT troops on Burmese soil that would eventually force them to flee into Laos and Thailand (Han, 2019: 56–67; Fan, 2010). Moreover, in the interest of long-term ‘friendly relations’ and ‘peace’, the treaty established a mixed Sino-Burmese commission to conduct surveys of the boundary and to set up markers. The task was completed in 1961, leading to the Protocol signed on October 13, 1961, which included large-scale maps formalizing the exact location of the boundary line and of 244 boundary markers (Fravel, 2008: 91). The two countries also agreed to conduct joint inspection of the demarcated boundary every five years. Since 1961, however, this has occurred only twice, while a third inspection is currently (2020-1) underway. Nevertheless, even though since the 1960 settlement no major dispute on the location of the boundary has emerged, its functions have dramatically changed. As shown in the next section, it is important to look beyond a nation-state perspective of boundary demarcation to acknowledge the lived realities and less-known histories that characterize borderland spaces—and that can even lead to their demise.

1968–1989: The demise of a borderland

Soon after the boundary line took shape into detailed maps and border pillars in the early 1960s, it became largely meaningless—it dematerialized under the drums of war

and socialist international solidarity. As Bertil Lintner details in his so-far-unmatched *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Myanmar* (Lintner, 1990), since the 1950s, 'groups of Myanmar communists had begun trekking towards China to ask for military assistance', and some CPB members had set up a base near Bhamo, in proximity to the old trade route to Tengchong to facilitate linking up with CCP officials. In 1953, the chairman of the CPB, by then engaged in an open armed opposition, reached Tengchong. He, and a small group of Burmese cadres, began receiving political training in Sichuan and Beijing. Two groups were even sent to further their studies in Moscow. Following the 1962 coupe by General Ne Win, ethnic rebellions and leftist activities in Myanmar's major cities flared up. Reinvigorated, the CPB began receiving open support from China for its struggle against military dictatorship. This support, initially, took the shape of propaganda material that the CPB could print in Beijing—yet as early as 1963, one of the Burmese cadres who had been sent to Moscow was 'put in charge of a team that began surveying possible infiltration routes from Yunnan into northeastern Burma' (Lintner, 1990: 22).

An actual invasion, however, did not take place until 1968 when CPB troops entered Myanmar territory at Mong Ko, only a few kilometres east of Wanding, and overran the Myanmar army garrison stationed there. By the end of that year, with the support of Chinese weapons and thousands of 'volunteers', the CPB gained control of four main 'war zones' along the China-Myanmar boundary, between Wanding and Kokang, east of the Salween (Nu) river. From there, over the course of the following few years, the CPB would conquer and administer an area of over 20 000 square kilometres² adjacent to the Chinese border all the way to the Mekong. Throughout this time, the Chinese supported the CPB with unprecedented generosity, providing equipment and weapons, food and even the construction of two hydroelectric power plants near CPB headquarters in Mong Ko and Panghsang (Lintner, 1990: 26).

As reports from the time clearly indicate, and as I could confirm through numerous interviews conducted in the area—in this phase—the border was conducive of exchanges, rather than constrictive to them. Not only the movement of goods across it was favoured by authorities on both sides, but civilians and troops freely moved from one side to the other. Former CPB cadres and 'volunteers' I interviewed in China, Myanmar and Thailand, all recounted how irrelevant the boundary line was to movement. CPB cadres, for instance, would often make use of the roads on the Chinese side in order to travel between the different areas under CPB control. Officials were regularly shuttled between Panghsang, Kunming and even Beijing, where they held meetings and underwent medical care.

The border maintained a formal role, however, in *how* goods were shipped across. In particular, Beijing allowed the CPB to levy taxes on imports from China—the revenue of it playing an increasingly important role in the CPB budget over the years. The monopoly was however discontinued by Beijing in 1980, a move that formally paved the way for other actors to step in. The lion's share of this trade occurred through the traditional crossing of Panghsai-Wanding, where the old Myanmar road crosses into China. Yet according to interviews, small-scale cross-border trade occurred, largely outside of any regulatory oversight, across CPB territories. All along, according to such informants, the China-Myanmar border largely dematerialized.

In 1989, the communist insurrection in northern Myanmar ended abruptly. A combination of factors—from the disaffection of local ethnic groups towards the Myanmar communists, to political changes in Beijing—led to a mutiny in Panghsang. Former communist troops, now under the control of local leaders, forced the CPB leadership to

flee across the Nam Hka river into China, while the territory formerly in the hands of the CPB was divided into a small constellation of ethnic states. At the same time, the Chinese government led by Deng Xiaoping was embracing a new phase of reforms, turning the wheels of Chinese economy towards a market-oriented paradigm. A new era for the China-Myanmar borderlands was set to begin, as detailed in the next section.

The paradox of 'opening up': border(ing) redux

For both its proponents and analysts, the story of China's and Myanmar's approach to their international border in the 1990s and 2000s is one of 'opening up'. Echoing China's broader economic approach in the post-Mao era—one of which was termed 'reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放)'—the China-Myanmar border was inscribed into the national quest for market-led reforms, global trade and infrastructure development (Summers, 2013).

In Yunnan, as in many other parts of the country, the task of 'opening-up' was carried out through large-scale investments in infrastructure development. Starting in the 1990s, in particular, a series of government-led programmes, from the '8-7 strategy' to the *xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), provided numerous opportunities for local officials to carry out ambitious cross-border projects, such as roads, SEZs, and logistics centres. Paradoxically, however, this *opening* was perceived by many locals as a *closure*—particularly as they lost, in part at least, the freedom of movement they experienced in previous decades (Rippa, 2020b). As this section will describe, the 'development' of the borderlands led also to renewed forms of state control through particular bordering practices and technologies: (i) border passes became necessary to exit and enter one's own country, (ii) customs officials played an increasingly important role in monitoring transactions, and (iii) security forces routinely cracked down on illicit exchanges.

In the process, the border assumed a *dangerous* character. Major border crossings such as Ruili were, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, known as flourishing drug markets and human trafficking hotspots. Chinese-managed gambling halls began appearing all across the border. Northern Myanmar was soon recast, in Chinese eyes, as a land of many opportunities—trades in jade, timber and other natural resources were making many in Yunnan rich. It remained, however, a threatening and unstable place—kidnappings, robberies and killings were frequent occurrences. In this phase, the China-Myanmar borderlands seemed to fall back to the frontier logic—captured between opportunities and perilousness (Sarma, 2021). The term *luan* 乱—messy, unstable—conveniently summed it up for many Yunnanese involved in cross-border activities in this phase, as I often heard.

From the perspective of state authorities in Yunnan, the 'opening up' of the border thus went hand in hand with its securitization. While local authorities across Yunnan's border counties and prefectures benefitted tremendously from various illicit cross-border activities, trans-national flows needed to be put under control (*guanrong* 管控). In particular, Chinese authorities have been concerned with the issues of drug smuggling, human trafficking and the possible impact of prolonged ethnic conflict in northern Myanmar of Yunnan's border regions (cf. Tian *et al.*, 2019; Bie *et al.*, 2014).

The story is not a unique one. Against the promise of a globalized and largely border-less world that emerged from the end of the Cold War era, the last three decades have witnessed a significant increase in how nation-states secure and control their borders. This occurred, mainly, as an attempt at reducing movement at borders

through particular technologies—not just walls, fences, cameras, heat sensors and drones—but also dedicated personnel—security agents, border patrol, customs official—and international treaties with neighbouring countries. Such policies are far from even—rather targeting the poor, the stateless and those in vulnerable positions (Jones, 2016).

At the same time, as major investments were poured into cross-border infrastructure, borders become conduits for particular exchanges while curbing to others. In the case of the China-Myanmar border, as a result of this process, local ethnic groups have been largely excluded from benefitting from cross-border activities, while local elites and well-connected outsiders have been reaping most of the profits (Rippa, 2020b). As I will discuss in more details below, the Belt and Road Initiative pushed forward by Beijing since 2013, is but the most recent of such projects. At its core, I will argue, lies anticipatory geographies of prosperity and trans-national connectivity that are reminiscent of and ultimately rooted in colonial-era visions and projects—a testament to the perseverance of certain imaginaries surrounding the China-Myanmar border. In what follows, I analyse three such imaginaries: terrain, technology and trade, that feeds into the ways in which the China-Myanmar borderlands are envisioned today through Sino-centric developmentalist narratives.

Terrain

Megoran's work singles out the 'ecological' dimension of boundaries as a key aspect of his biographical approach. In following this indication, this section answers recent calls for the scholarship on borders and border region to be more attuned with the more-than-human, accounting for landscape movements in our analyses of political boundaries (cf. Krause, 2016; Dorondel *et al.*, 2019). According to this perspective, for instance, the hydro-dynamics of rivers have important geopolitical consequences, and are often at odds with a strictly cartographic, Westphalian understanding of national borders. In the gap between these different understanding of space and movement, I argue, terrain lingers as a predominant imaginary to address the China-Myanmar borderlands. To show this, we have to go back more than a century.

In a missive from Tengyue dated October 1914, enclosing a report on the frontier by Archibald Rose, Acting Consul Smith wrote to British ambassador in Beijing, Jordan regarding the matter of extraterritoriality of British subject at the China-Burma frontier. In it, he describes such frontier in the following words:

The most important circumstance to be borne in mind in relation to this frontier is that it is no sense an ethnographical frontier. The boundary line passes in a way which may often be fairly called arbitrary, through Shan, Kachin, Lisu, or other tribal regions, sometimes dividing not only tribes ethnologically related, but even families related by blood. At some parts of the frontier a man walking along paddy-bungs might cross from China to Burma and from Burma to China a dozen times without being aware from any character, whether physical, ethnological, philological, or otherwise, indeed from any observable circumstance, that there had been any frontier to cross. He might even do the same in some places on a main road (British Library Archives, IOR/L/PS10/208).

Consul Smith's impressions on the *arbitrariness* of the boundary line echoed those of many officers and travellers of the time. British botanist-explorer F. K. Ward, for instance, noted that the particular forbidding terrain characterizing the area made it

not so much a no-man's land, but rather 'an any-man's Land' (Department of State USA, 1964). In fact, as James Scott famously argued, the hills and mountains of the Yunnan-Myanmar borderlands have been, throughout the centuries, a particular zone of refuge for communities fleeing the encroaching lowland-states (Scott, 2009)—a thesis that accounts, at least in part, for the incredible ethnic diversity that can be found in the region to this very day. Such diversity, and the lack of clear 'ethnographical' boundaries, did not dissuade British officers from finding ways to precisely demarcate the boundary line—a task that was faced by the recurrent challenge of the *terrain*.

In 1926-7, British officials in Tengyue, Kunming and Beijing, were pressing their Chinese counterparts to collaborate in an effort to survey and demarcate 'certain disputed portions of the Burma-Yunnan border' (British Library Archives, IOR/L/PS/10/338). These included the erection of border pillars, as well as the discussion of 'encroachment' by 'Chinese' farmers on the Myanmar side of the Shweli river. Of particular interest were disputes in the area of today's Ruili and Wanding: between border pillars 95 and 96, and particularly the Nawngkhok island case in Mengmao district. A letter by Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma W.B. Brander to the Government of India, dated 25 May 1926, states the following:

The Chinese population on the other side of the Shweli River are reasonable and have in a large number of cases accepted without question the decisions of Burma Frontier Service Officers in demarcating boundaries. The *real trouble* is that boundary pillars in many places do not indicate clearly the British claim owing to the removal by *river action* or otherwise of the intermediate pillars, or from failure to erect intermediate pillars when the original survey was made and that in certain other places *the changes in the Shweli River have made it impossible without a careful survey to determine where the boundary actually runs* (British Library Archives, IOR/L/PS/10/338, emphasis mine).

This missive clearly identifies the problem not in the attitudes of the locals, but rather in the 'dilatatory policy' of Chinese authorities, as well as in the landscape itself. Changes in the course of the River seem to be ultimately responsible for the uncertainties of border demarcation. In a memorandum to the Civil Governor of Yunnan, dated 12th July, 1926, Acting Consul General at Yunnanfu, G. A. Combe, takes a different approach by openly blaming 'Mengmao Chinese' and describing in some details how the boundary line in Nawngkhok area 'has been constantly encroached upon' (British Library Archives, IOR/L/PS/10/338). In a prompt response to this memorandum, the Civil Governor of Yunnan put forward a proposal for the settlement of these two disputes by implicitly redirecting the blame to the river. In particular, he states that disputes arise not from the behaviour of local 'Chinese', but rather 'from the fact that the river changes its course occasionally, causing removal of boundary pillars'. To prevent conflict, he continues, 'as the river channel is liable to change, the lands near it should for the time being be protected and barred from cultivation by peasants on either side' (British Library Archives, IOR/L/PS/10/338).

The issue, clearly, is political. British authorities tend to ascribe particular blame to Chinese villagers' responses to particular environmental changes. Chinese authorities, on the other hand, continuously re-direct the attention to the river and the boundary line, and thus avoid discussing the behaviour of their subjects in so far as the issue of demarcation has not been solved. The Tengyue Taoyin, for instance, in a previous communication to the Tengyue consul (March 1st, 1926), went into great details to explain how the behaviour of the river impacted the boundary:

Owing to the Shweli gradually changing its course to the west and washing away both the sites of the old Nawngghok and Pingmao villages, the then Nawngghok villagers moved to the north-west and settled in the present Nawngghok village, likewise the then Pingmao villagers moved westwards and lived in the present Pingmao village in order to avoid the water. The original Boundary Pillars Nos. 21 and 22 having been carried away by the Shweli, and no re-erection of the old sites being possible, the Burma frontier authorities have successively moved the two pillars into the west bank belonging to China. As the Shweli has now again taken its course eastwards, the side of the old Nawngghok village, that of the new establishment Nawngghok village and the side of the old Pingmao village have all re-appeared.

Here, the movement of Chinese villagers is directly connected to the movement of the river—a consequence of and adaptation to particular environmental circumstances. The problem, the Taoyin implies, should not lie with the villagers' actions—but rather with the lack of clarity over the location of the border pillars and boundary line following changes in the river course. The 'island case', as both parties often refer to the issue of Nawngghok village, seems to defy any attempt at clear demarcation. In the correspondence from the era, many such cases emerge—while the boundary line is supposedly fixed, all around it is moving: rivers, fields, border pillars. The Sino-Burmese frontier, that 'wild borderland' (Rose, 1912: 196) described by Archibald Rose, seemed to be characterized by impermanence. In the words of British officers, the 'hill tribes' are not the only ones who are deemed 'unruly'. The landscape itself—with its steep hills, dense forests, and shifting rivers—does not seem to fit the modernist project of territorial demarcation that the British embarked upon.

The issue survives till today. The 1960 border agreement between the Union of Myanmar and the PRC states that where the Boundary follows a river, the treaty accepts the international practice of demarcation (Department of State USA, 1964: 18). Yet as rivers constantly change their course, the challenge presented by the terrain remains central in the demarcation and management of the border today. This is, but one of several ways in which terrain remains a crucial part of both the making and managing of the China-Myanmar borderlands today. As I shall detail in the next sections, in particular, the perceived 'unruliness' of the landscape shapes both the technologies employed for monitoring the boundary as well as those who cross it—and in so doing, impacts the anticipatory geographies of trade and exchange embedded in Belt and Road promises.

Technology

Following his description of the Myanmar-Yunnan border as 'in no sense an ethnographical frontier' quoted above, Acting Consul Smith discussed 'extraterritoriality'—that is, the issue of British subjects in China. In doing so, he provided a vivid picture of what *can* and *cannot* be achieved:

Shans in the Northern Shan States in Burma, Kachins all along the mountainous parts of the frontier, Lisus in the Myitkyina district, have to all intents and purposes the same manners and customs, the same dress, the same religion, the same language, the same customary law, as the Shans, Kachins, and Lisus on the adjacent parts of the Chinese side of the frontier. In these circumstances it is obvious that [...] the registration of British subjects and the passport system, are wholly impracticable. To require a Burmese Shan pedlar, for instance, to obtain a passport from the consul in Tengyueh before he should be permitted to cross from Hsenwi to Mongmao (which is technically in the 'interior' of China), or a Kachin or Lisu or other

tribesman to do the same before visiting his relations in Chinese territory, is too grotesquely impossible to be gravely considered (British Library Archives, IOR/L/PS10/208).

Over a century after this missive, dated 1914, what Acting Consul Smith described as ‘grotesquely impossible’ is a fact of life of the hundreds of thousands living in proximity to the China-Myanmar border. While indeed (as the vignette from the Wanding border crossing with which I began this paper shows) a great deal of un-regulated border crossing still occurs—most Shans, Lisus and Kachins from northern Myanmar who travel to China do so while holding some kind of papers: be it a passport or a border pass, often paired with a working permit. Upon entering and exiting China, Myanmar subjects go through check points in which their belongings are often inspected, and their papers stamped. The same is true for Chinese border residents visiting Myanmar. In such processes, technology plays a fundamental role. In this section, *technology* refers to both the ways in which the border is demarcated—through mapping, aerial photos, fences and border pillars—and managed—through check-points, border gates, roads, border passes, visa officers and working permits.

In particular, starting in the early 2000s, and largely following the boom in timber trade that characterized upper Shan and Kachin state, prefecture- and county-level authorities on the Yunnan side of the border invested heavily in cross-border infrastructure (Rippa, 2020b). At times, following the activities of logging companies who opened up some of the roads leading into Myanmar, Tengchong authorities set up immigration and customs facilities in places that, until then, were largely outside of direct government control. The process is ongoing—in Tengchong county as in many other instances along the Yunnan-Myanmar boundary, new facilities equipped with automated border control systems and state-of-the-art scanning technology are currently being planned and built (cf. Ming, 2016). The ongoing (2021) Covid-19 pandemic seems to have even furthered Chinese state attempts to tightly control cross-border movement. As several reports have highlighted, in late 2020, PRC officials have started erecting razor-wire fences along the Kokang region, some 200 km south of Ruili (*The Irrawaddy*, 2020a). Later on, pictures emerged of new fences in the Wanding area, hinting at a more ambitious project to fence most of the boundary (*Newsweek*, 2020; *The Diplomat*, 2020).

Furthermore, new technologies are currently employed in the ongoing joint boundary inspection of the Myanmar-China border, a task that includes ‘the maintenance of boundary pillars [...], surveying the boundary between pillars, taking measures for the change of course of boundary rivers, adjusting boundary lines’ (*Yunnan ribao*, 2006). In order to do so, state-of-the-art technologies are put into use, and members of the inspection team trained accordingly. This time, in particular, aerial drone footage will be used, and an explicit goal of the inspection is to further digitize (*shuzihua* 数字化) its findings (Yunnan Foreign Affairs Office, 2020).

Monitoring, however, does not end at the boundary—Myanmar citizens travelling to, or residing in Yunnan, are subjected to numerous regulations, as I move on to detail. For instance, one of the first activities drawing many Myanmar workers since the early 2000s has been the car washing business. In Tengchong, there are at least one hundred car washing centres, virtually all of which employ Myanmar labour. One such place is owned by Yang He, a Tengchong man in his late 30s who opened his car washing centre some ten years ago. Over this time, the business—managed by himself and his brother—grew to employ nine Myanmar workers and a Chinese mechanic. ‘Before’—Yang He told me while having lunch at a small eatery close to his car

washing centre—‘we hired Myanmar without any paperwork, we just paid them and gave them a place to sleep’ (pers. comm., Fieldnotes, Tengchong, 2017). In recent years, however, things have gotten more complicated. Since the mid-2010s, he told me, employees like himself had to cooperate with the local police department (*gong'anju* 公安局), and make a contract for each worker. The contract, he complained, now included the possibility for Myanmar workers to go back home in case of emergency for up to a month without losing their jobs—something that, he told me, happened frequently with his workers. Working conditions are otherwise quite tough: Myanmar workers are paid 1400/1500 RMB per month, and are given food and accommodation, but only have two free days every month. ‘This is not a good job’, Yang He candidly admitted. ‘But you see, they don’t speak Chinese, they cannot find anything better. For those who can speak Chinese, there are better jobs, with more money’. The main issue troubling him, however, was that of contracts and working permits. ‘Regulation (*guiding*) are more and more strict (*yan jian*)’, he told me. ‘It is very difficult now (*hen nan ban* 很难办) to get them permits), and it’s expensive’ (pers. comm., Fieldnotes, Tengchong, 2017).

Not far from Yang He’s car washing centre, I heard a similar story from Wan Pen, a Myanmar Shan woman from Muse who runs a small nail salon in Tengchong. Wan Pen arrived in Tengchong eight years before, after spending her youth doing odd jobs between Muse and Ruili. At first, she worked in a nail salon owned by a Chinese woman, then after a few years opened her own business with the help of her younger sister—whom she helped to obtain a passport and working permit. When we last spoke, in the summer of 2019, her business was thriving and she had just hired a Chinese girl to help with customers. Wan Pen’s business required regular contacts with the police department. Her working permit, as well as her sister’s, had to be renewed every year. Furthermore, they had to check in at the local police department every three months. That way, she explained, local authorities knew that we would not be moving to another place in China. Wan Pen’s Mandarin was fluent, and she was taking care of the paperwork herself. For many other Myanmar workers, she told me, this was not the case, and they had to resort to paying a translator.

These examples ultimately call for an expansion of our understanding of borders, towards something akin to anthropologist Franck Billé’s (2018) ‘haptic’ approach. Billé’s point of departure is somewhat similar to my own reflections in Wanding, with which I began this paper. Over the past few decades, he noticed that most research in the social sciences, particularly anthropology and geography—has criticized the conceptualization of national borders as homogeneous and linear by focusing on the *experiences* of borderlands, which are often underscored by social, economic and cultural linkages crossing geopolitical demarcations. In so doing, however, this body of scholarship has reinforced a particular view that borderlands are exceptional spaces of contact between largely homogeneous interiors. ‘Paradoxically’, he concludes, ‘the more we focus on cross-linkages, the more we foreground hybridity, the more we reify that line—all the while insisting that it is abstract and ideological’ (Billé, 2018: 62). Comparing it with skin, Billé suggests that we instead see the border within the national everyday even when that line on the map is thousands of kilometres away, and thus understands the border as a field of state violence and exceptional prerogatives. This exceptional everyday and its historical legacies are, as I move on to show, constitutive parts of the border’s alternative imaginary of trans-national connectivity, and a key component of the aspirational geographies it reflects today.

Trade

The 'Belt and Road Initiative' looms large across Southeast Asia. And yet, as Tim Oakes reminds us in a recent intervention (Oakes, 2021), the BRI remains today, almost a decade after its launch, little more than a 'vague idea, a notion, a gesture, the beginning of a sentence waiting to be completed by someone else'. Noticing the imprecision of BRI maps, and the lack of an official cartography of the Belt and Road, Murton (2021) reaches similar conclusions, further arguing that 'the apparent paradox between the BRI as invisible thing and BRI as promised future reveals the manifold ways in which infrastructures articulate politics and, vice-versa, how politics articular infrastructure' (Murton, 2021: 1). This argument thus not only speaks to recent literature that urges scholars and practitioners to address the BRI in the complexity and plurality of its multi-faced entanglements and engagements (cf. Oliveira *et al.* 2020; Sidaway *et al.* 2020; Lin *et al.* 2021), but also to the infrastructural, future-oriented mode of visioning encapsulated by the 'anticipatory geography' heuristic. What is particularly relevant for the argument I am developing in this paper, is addressing the impact of such processes on bordering practices. These include, notably, both the demarcating and managing that I have outlined in the previous two sections, as well as how the development and anticipation of Chinese-funded trans-national infrastructure affect formal and informal trading practices at the local level. As I will argue, for borderland communities, Belt and Road promises ultimately result in an ongoing process of (en)closure, as part of which mobilities and opportunities are curbed, rather than enhanced.

To show this, it is important to once again foreground a biographical approach rooted in an historical understanding of border making and managing. Take for instance, the following apparent paradox. As I described in the previous section, in just a few decades, PRC authorities managed to achieve what Acting Consul Smith deemed 'grotesquely impossible' by making not only the boundary line visible, but borderland populations legible to state authorities. However, neither Chinese nor Myanmar authorities have made any major step towards achieving what the British thought was a realistic goal: to build a railway between the two countries and turn the China-Myanmar border into a major trade corridor. This is despite the fact that trade has been central to the ways in which the China-Myanmar border has been imagined over the past 150 years, and that infrastructural aspirations have underpinned China's approach to this particular border region since the 1990s.

To understand this apparent paradox, the very category of trade requires a clarification. As mentioned above, the region has a deep-rooted history of both local and long-distance trade that pre-dates British colonial expansion into northern Burma, as well as Chinese imperial consolidation in Yunnan. This legacy is today frequently acknowledged by Chinese writings on the Southern Silk Road that forms the narrative backbone of several BRI projects in the region (cf. Sigley, 2016). The underlying logic, however, seems to remain bound by the same considerations that colonial officials wrote about at the turn of the twentieth century: that in order for trans-national trade to flourish, copious investments in large-scale connectivity infrastructure would be necessary. Such an argument not only frames the region as 'lacking' connectivity, but also fails to consider existing forms of trade and exchange, as I argued above. The imaginary of trade I lay out here, then, does not refer to actually existing connections. Rather, it comprises a certain state view of the borderlands as in need of infrastructural development to 'revive' past forms of connectivity.

In this section, I briefly trace how this particular imaginary of trade, shapes—and has shaped—the China-Myanmar border. In doing so, I show that the current vision of trans-national connectivity pushed forward by the PRC, and framed under the BRI umbrella, is many things but original. Rather, this particular aspirational geography should be traced back to at least the late colonial period, when ambitious plans of trans-national connectivity on the basis of infrastructure development were initially drawn up. Furthermore, I re-iterate that current investments are unlikely to lead to another de-materialization of the border. Rather, as I stressed in the previous section, the logic of containment and management will likely prevail, particularly when it comes to borderlands communities.

The Myanmar-China railway conjures up this particular imaginary better than any other project. In January 2020, in the course of a state visit to Myanmar, Xi Jinping discussed with his Myanmar counterparts the possibility of building a high-speed railway connecting China-funded Kyaukphyu port and SEZ on the bay of Bengal and Yunnan. During the previous year, officials from both countries had worked towards a feasibility study, following an MoU signed in 2018. As Frances O'Morchoe (*The Irrawaddy*, 2020b) pointed out, 'if this came to fruition, it would see a railway built which was first mooted over 150 years ago'. The idea took initial shape in the minds of British officials in the early nineteenth century, and became particularly pressing once France began planning a railway connecting Vietnam and Yunnan. At last, in 1895, the government of India authorized construction of the railway—only to walk back to the project a few years later, as relations with France improved.

While the idea of a railway connecting the two countries often reappeared, the project never materialized. Its rationale, too, remained largely the same: to foster trade and open-up new markets, while reinforcing state presence in the borderlands. In this regard, it is not surprising that the routes envisioned for the railway followed the main trade routes of the time. When the government of India first surveyed the border area in 1868, the team led by Colonel Edward Sladen travelled from Bhamo to Tengchong—which at the time was the main trade route between Myanmar and China. The railway, at the time, was envisioned to follow the same route. Today, the high-speed railway discussed by Xi Jinping during his visit to Myanmar, would cross the border at Muse/Ruili—which accounts for the overwhelming majority of cross-border exchanges.

What this particular—and still aspirational geography details—is how the perpendicular lines of trade routes and national borders are intimately tied to one another. Histories of trans-national investments, such as those characterizing the present moment of Myanmar-China relations, thus need to be understood in conjunction with the processes of nation building through border demarcation that I have described in the first part of this paper, as well as 'modern' approaches to border management. In this latter phase, as I have argued in the previous section, the logic of 'control' is given primacy over any attempt to 'open up' cross-border markets, hence damaging borderland communities above everyone else (Rippa, 2020b).

This outcome is hardly surprising, nor is it lost on borderland communities. While Belt and Road anticipatory geographies are framed in the language of global connectivity and inclusive development, there is little doubt locally that such projects are bound to re-configure sovereign spaces and territorial logics. As in the cases of the Myitsone dam (Kiik, 2016) and Chinese agribusinesses (Woods, 2019), Chinese development projects are often seen as yet another instance of Myanmar military encroachment and exploitation. To be sure, as long as large-scale plans of trans-national connectivity are drawn up in Beijing, London or Naypyidaw, based on a cartographic understanding of border areas

rooted in the logic of the Westphalian nation-state, such plans are unlikely to fully address the complexities, histories and peculiarities of the region they will supposedly cross. They are also likely to be unsuccessful, as the example of the railway demonstrates—and most importantly they will remain detrimental to local communities. As this paper attempted to show, this approach is not new—nor is it exclusively connected to the genesis of modern states in the area. Rather, it rests upon a broader, in both geographical and temporal scopes, understanding of what borders, boundaries and borderlands are for.

Conclusion

In this paper I showed the usefulness of a biographical approach to the China-Myanmar borderlands, not only for tracing some of the historical trajectories that defined its making and managing. This approach also, and crucially, sheds light on some of the aspirational and anticipatory geographies embedded today in BRI plans. To be sure, if the BRI is ‘an aspirational statement of evolutionary principles that invite imaginary cartographies of lines and corridors’ (Oakes, 2021), then it is important to not only take such aspirations seriously, but also to analyse the particular imaginaries upon which they rest. This paper attempted to do that by paying close attention to the three, interrelated imaginaries of terrain, technology and trade, and how they developed and overlapped over the past 150 years. In doing so, I attempted to bring the everyday dimension in conversation with boundaries’ histories, thus showing how borders are continuously and inevitably entangled with other bodies—of water, woods and land, for instance. Boundaries are also reconfiguring such environments and communities by virtue of their establishment—through border pillars, surveys and claims to exclusive sovereignty that derive from it. Borders are entangled in very specific ways to human bodies too—and particularly through forms of control that the ‘management’ of boundaries require. Here, the border is displaced, through technologies and bureaucratic procedures, from the boundary line itself to become an aspect of the everyday.

In tracing the biography of the China-Myanmar border, this paper thus showed how particular imaginaries rooted in the region’s history as well as centre-periphery dynamics, shape (Sino-centric) anticipatory geographies today as well as local perceptions of and responses to them. In doing so, it expanded on Megoran’s biographical approach, pointing out that the materialization, rematerialization and dematerialization of national boundaries should be addressed as both contingent and future-oriented dynamics. In other words, they not only shape the nature of borderlands at particular times, but also how such spaces are envisioned and acted upon by both local, national and trans-national actors. In the context of China-Southeast Asian borderlands, this requires taking into account both the histories of previous encounters and interventions, but also how these contributed to shaping, reinforcing or challenging particular imaginaries that form the backbone of current anticipatory geographies such as the Belt and Road. In this regard, and more broadly, this paper both pushes forward and encourages studies of China-Southeast Asia ties that take national boundaries not so much as objects of analyses in themselves, but as points of departures for close examinations of the social, political and environmental dimensions of trans-national exchanges.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was conducted with the generous support of the Volkswagen Foundation (‘Environing Infrastructure’ freigeist project) and the European Regional Development Fund

(Mobilitas Pluss program, MOBJD496). I would also like to thank Shaun Lin, Yang Yang, Roger Norum as well as the participants in the workshop 'Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones (ARI, 13–14 August 2021)' for their invaluable comments and support.

Endnotes

- 1 I use 'Myanmar' to refer to the naming of the country after 1989 (reflecting official policy) and 'Burma' for earlier periods. The use of these and other terms in material I cite from varies.
- 2 According to Bertil Lintner, Steinberg and Fan (2012: 138) on the other hand, calculated the size of the territory under CPB control to be 34 000 km².

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