

Neighboring China

Project summary

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Objectives and Work performed

The projects overarching aim was to address the question what China's recent rise means for communities living directly along its borders. It thereby pursued three main objectives.

First, in Western as well as Asian imaginaries the communities living along the PRC's present day borders occupy a place associated with remoteness and, depending on the point of view, backwardness to be overcome or authentic tradition to be preserved. Despite the fact that that transnational trade was a salient feature of most of these borderland communities, they were usually rather portrayed as local tribes than as cosmopolitan actors. The first objective of the present project was to correct this overly simplistic image by juxtaposing it with ethnographic research on the manifold connections and entanglements that are so characteristic for these seemingly remote areas.

Second, most of the communities along China's edge are currently experiencing a phase of opening. Many cross-border ties that were severed during much of the second half of the 20th century are being revived. Another objective of this project was thus to gain a better comparative understanding of this contemporary development.

The third objective of the "Neighbouring China" project was to develop the notion of "neighbouring" as an analytical lens that would facilitate such a comparative perspective on borderland communities.

Two phases of fieldwork of about three months each were carried out in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the PRC to gather ethnographic material on processes of exchange, cross-border relations, and their transformation over the past decade (objective 1). The insights gathered were compared with the Himalayan materials gathered during the two years of research prior to the Fellowship (objective 2) and presented in eight talks which the fellow gave during the time of his fellowship. Work on an edited volume with the title "The Art of Neighboring", which emerged from a workshop under the same name, provided the framework in which conceptual reflection on the notion of neighboring took place (objective 3).

Results and impact

Two interwoven themes – cosmopolitanism along remote pathways and the “second life of development” – and a new question resulted from the project

Actors in the Chinese borderlands often pursue distinctively cosmopolitan endeavours. This cosmopolitanism, however, is not an effect of modernity’s eventual arrival in the rugged periphery but has deep historical roots. These roots are linked to the long-standing traditions of trade and exchange, which do not occur uniformly but are channeled along particular *pathways* through Asia’s high mountains. These pathways are good to think with because they highlight the spatial relations and asymmetries characteristic for the region.

The “second life of development” is an insight originally derived from the researcher’s work in Humla (Nepal), which has been highly productive in the analysis of the situation in the Pamirs as well. While development is omnipresent as discourse and ethico-political framework, its techniques and methods hardly ever take the specific situation in the borderlands into account. As a result, it is often as if development would lead a “second life” in the borderlands, obvious to everybody involved but invisible to the reports and evaluations of development agencies.

Cosmopolitanism along remote pathways and the second life of development describe realities in the geopolitically fragile borderlands at China’s edge that have so far not received the attention they deserve. A better understanding of the cosmopolitan ventures of people in seemingly remote peripheries and their relation to development efforts serves policymakers, think tanks, as well as programme officers in NGOs and international development agencies.

The two interwoven themes also led to a more fundamental question about remoteness in the 21st century, which came to define the direction of the fellow’s future research: the question how remoteness and connectivity relate to and condition each other.

In the study area *Neighbouring China* was concerned with, remoteness is usually assumed to be the defining condition of life: the Pamirian Knot as well as the Himalayas are considered backward, authentic, or unruly *because* – for better or worse – they are isolated and far away from developed, urban centres and state control. However, state-of-the-art research on circulation and mobility shows that connectivity with the outside world is an essential feature of livelihood strategies in remote areas. They frequently find themselves at the crossroads of intensive exchange of natural resources, labour, capital and manufactured goods. Migrants, smugglers, and saints pass through. Geologists, tourists, NGOs, reporters and missionaries come here to look for resources, opportunities, and target groups. Livelihoods are shaped as much by connectivity as by remoteness. The historical moment, which the *Neighbouring China* explored – namely the contemporary phase of opening up after a period of closure – has to be seen against the background of the fundamental nexus of remoteness and connectivity that shaped the region for centuries.

These questions will be further investigated in the fellows ERC Starting Grant Project “Remoteness and Connectivity: Highland Asia in the World” (2015-2020).

Project website: www.neighbouringchina.net