



Services > Reviews > Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands

Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands

Michela Bonato

The use of the plural “borderlands” already in the book title unfolds the epistemological tension of considering cross-border areas as a homogeneous unit, inviting the reader to reflect on a multitude of spaces, people, economic flows, past histories, and future possibilities. While acknowledging the difficulty of weaving a constructive network of discourses among the many interactions, failures, and unresolved issues that characterise the Sino-North Korean border area (p. 17), the editors nonetheless show their ability to assemble eighteen essays that force the view on its socio-spatial complexity and challenge the traditional narrative of Chinese hegemony.

The book is divided into five parts. Part I, “Geography and Borderlands Theory: Framing the Region,” elaborates a comparative historical-spatial theoretical framework to move away from the perception of the Sino-North Korean border region as a mere site of “sanctions evasion or enforcement” (p. 25). Chapter 1 shows how cross-border exchange and institutionalised securitisation processes may lead to a multiscalar remodeling of border spaces (Boyle). Leake also underlines this point by repositioning the Sino-North Korean borderlands in a regional narrative of Asian borders shaped by anticolonial movements and the Cold War. It turns out that there is “no

single border logic” (p. 55), as bordering institutions are constantly questioned by non-state actors and the significances attached to these spaces. In Chapter 3, the authors offer a tool box (interviews, focus groups, videos, personal conversations, and book material) to fluidly shape the personal and social imaginary of the region during their research period. It calls for a more genuine attention to the uncertainty of space-making in the apparent historical fixity of the place.

Part II, “Towards a Methodology of Sino-North Korean Border Studies,” challenges the data scarcity and difficult mobility in this peripheral area by offering an interdisciplinary vision based on the knowledge of local languages and area studies. The privileged category of “defector-migrants” is questioned both statistically and ethnographically through surveys and participant observation (Denney and Green, Bell and Armytage). It also shifts the focus towards the South Korean border, highlighting issues of identity, cultural denial, and material-bodily suffering by looking at the historical traces of regional mobility as an experimental study of marginalisation. The last two chapters deconstruct the spatial intertwining. Boydston’s contribution does so through an analysis of bilateral capital flows between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and China, while Cathcart’s chapter explores the mythological space linked to the symbolic glorification of Kim Il-sung which legitimises the foundation of the DPRK. It also emerges that the official Chinese narrative depicts a broader anti-imperialist scenario that problematises the presence of Korean ethnic communities on Chinese soil. Furthermore, the lack of a “Yan’an equivalent”¹ in Kim Il-sung’s stay in Northeast China may even detract from the ontological structure of North Korean state authority. Problems of positionality, access to the archives, and language complicate the understanding of which state-building tactics have been implemented since the 1950s in the cross-border area and what types of spectacularisation they have yielded, including the exploitation of nature (p. 134).

Part III, “Histories of the Sino-Korean Border Region,” deals with security, mobility, and ethnicity issues in what is now the Chinese area of the Korean Autonomous Prefecture of Yanbian. Wang shows how archival and

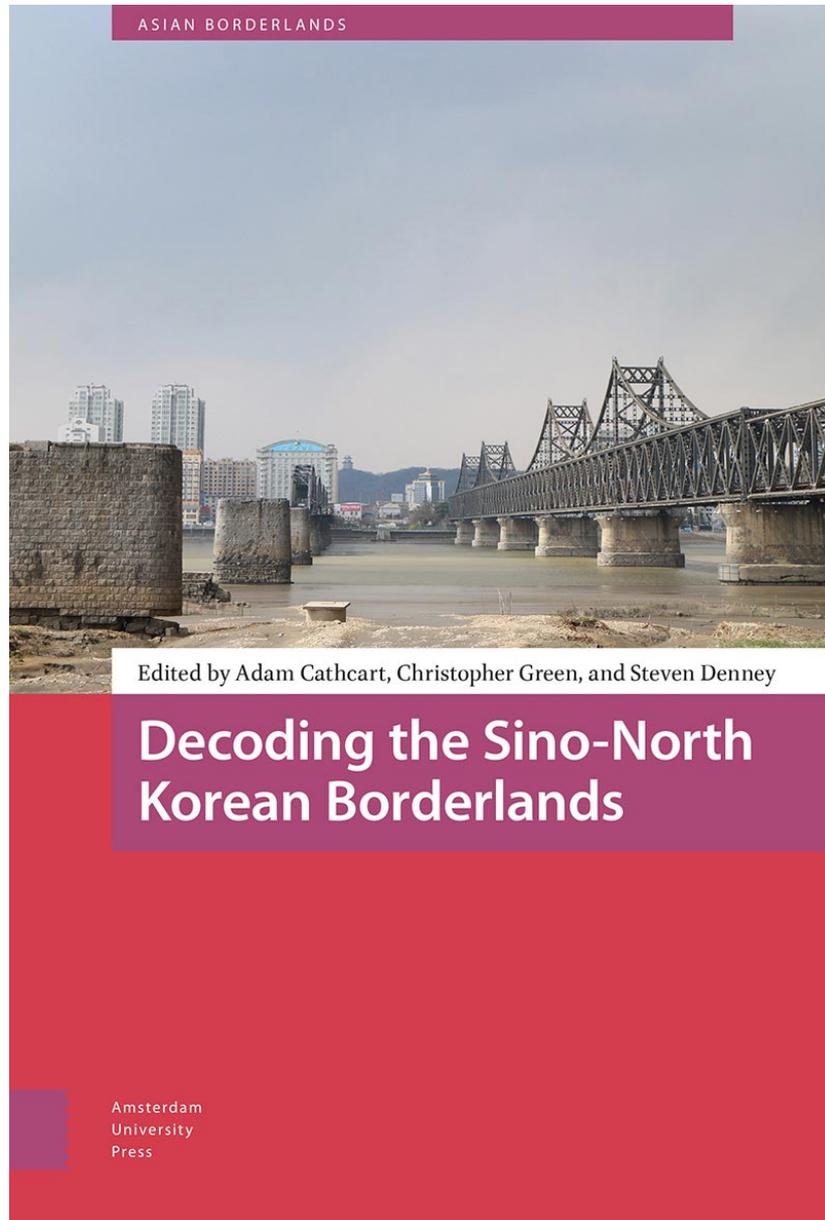
cartographic material supports the idea that the border area was under the control of the Great Qing despite an alleged tension towards “neutrality” (p. 177); conversely, the eastern bank of the Yalu River brought about the recognition of Korean territory long before the Western concepts of “sovereignty” and “nation” were introduced into local languages. According to Dong, the repressive policy towards ethnic languages during the Great Leap Forward (“... in Learning Chinese,” p. 196), may be linked to systematised collectivisation and alleged Han cultural supremacy derived from the radicalisation of Marxist materialism during the Maoist period. The “hybrid” character of ethnic Korean Chinese in terms of language and customs also emerges in the personal “travelogue” (p. 219) of the British diplomat authors Morris and Hoare, who close this section by drawing a picture of Yanbian during the neoliberal transition in the 1990s.

Part IV, “Contemporary Borderland Economics,” investigates the North Korean economy after the 1995-1998 famine through the lens of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) of the DPRK borderlands. It highlights how attempts at marketisation through international trade, foreign direct investment, and state agencies (Ward and Green), and the political implications of the expected failure to restore the domestic economy (Green and Cathcart), are directly linked to shifting Russian-Chinese interests and trust as in the case of the Rajin-Sonbong area on the Tumen River Triangle (Clément and Abrahamian). The case studies reveal the difficulties in promoting greater regional economic integration in Northeast Asia, where competitive partners, legislative impasse, ideological struggles, and international sanctions reduce the strategic potential of inland port SEZs.

Part V, “Human Rights and Identity in the Borderland and Beyond,” deals with the space of precariousness and abuse in which North Korean defector-economic migrants in China, especially women, find themselves trapped (Hamisevicz and Yeo). It also shows how the Chinese border is often represented as a temporary space of transition to the potential freedom embodied by South Korea as a final destination. Indeed, China tends to keep legal terms vague and to avoid UN refugee conventions by appealing to the economic reasons behind the flight (Hee Choi). Moving to South Korea,

Bregman emphasises the role of Western political agencies and NGOs in building a narrative of salvation in which the North Korean women-defectors' agency is strategically exploited to fashion the nightmare atmosphere of the Cold War. However, "(defector-)diva citizens" may help overcome Global North-South discourses towards a unified regional consciousness. Pulford's ethnographic work that concludes this section revolves around the fluid idea of "Koreanness" as perceived by the *Goryo saram* people (Koreans from the former USRR) relocated to Yanbian. It contests the vision of static linguistic and cultural modes in a post-socialist space.

To conclude, the book constitutes an excellent example of interdisciplinary study applied to a fluid landscape such as the Sino-North Korean border region. Emphasising the need to conduct parallel field research, it also opens a discussion about which methods could be more reliable in a framework of uncertainty on state data. The use of heterogeneous sources and methods and clear argumentation certainly stimulate the intellectual curiosity of readers about the socio-geographical facets of bordering areas along the blurred boundaries of two or more cultures and their political-economic systems. Lastly, the rigorous analytical approach that characterises the essays intends to invite a much more critical commitment to the study of borderlands in the world and their globalised entanglements. As Gray points out in the afterword (p. 431), we should leave monolithic nationalist discourses behind and engage with localised stories of identity-building, resistance, and significance recurring in cross-border contexts. This may help shed light on complex intertwining and even rebalance the flows of power on the international chessboard, allowing the myriad of peculiar spaces of everyday life on state borders to enter and rewrite their own narratives.



Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands

Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, Steven Denney (eds)
Amsterdam University Press, 2021
9789462987562

Since the 1990s, the Chinese-North Korean border region has undergone a gradual transformation into a site of intensified cooperation, competition, and intrigue. These changes have prompted a significant volume of critical scholarship and media commentary across multiple languages and disciplines. Drawing on existing studies and new data, *Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands* brings much of this literature into concert by pulling together a wide range of insight on the region's

economics, security, social cohesion, and information flows. Drawing from multilingual sources and transnational scholarship, this volume is enhanced by the extensive fieldwork undertaken by the editors and contributors in their quests to decode the borderland. In doing so, the volume emphasizes the link between theory, methodology, and practice in the field of Area Studies and social science more broadly.

[Buy >](#)

Initiatives

Programmes

Networks

Events

Masterclasses

Clusters

Supported projects

Services

Fellowships

The Newsletter

Books

Reviews

Blog

[Podcasts](#)

[Resources](#)

[Mailing list](#)

People

[Staff](#)

[Board](#)

[Academic Committee](#)

[Fellows](#)

[Alumni](#)

IIAS

[News](#)

[From the director](#)

[About us](#)

[Our activities](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

IIAS

Rapenburg 59

2311 GJ Leiden

the Netherlands

T +31-71-5272227

E IIAS@iias.nl

