Borderlands and migration: an overview

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Borderlands and migration are invariably interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Borderlands are connected geographic spaces around politically drawn boundaries or historically and ethnically linked frontiers that facilitate and sustain human migration. Migration refers to human mobility across spaces and borders of different kinds, both within and across national countries, while it varies with and between opportunities and obstacles presented by different borders and borderlands. This essay provides an overview of borderlands as both the crucial spaces where migration occurs and as an important shaper of migration, past and present.

Shifting borderlands

The symbiotic connection between borderlands and international migration is premised on national boundaries being politically or militarily drawn lines that demarcate the beginning and end of national territorial sovereignty. As such, and particularly in the contemporary world, national borders guard and regulate the movement of people between them at chokepoints – border towns, cities, or regions. While not prohibiting legal migration from one country to its contiguous neighbor, borders are supposed to prevent illegal migration between neighboring countries. In reality, however, many national boundaries today create a wedge between historically and culturally linked territories that once were open to and traversed by back-and-forth migration. Moreover, even the most heavily controlled borders often fail to halt illegal migration effectively, as is evidenced by the United States–Mexico border.

Impinging on the relationship between borderlands and migration are some important changes associated with new and powerful processes that are operating across a regionalized and globalized world. On one hand, informal regional integration has intensified across the multiple and adjacent national boundaries. Unlike formal regionalism such as created the European Union, informal regionalism thrives on the policies of local governments, and the actions of private-sector and community actors near borders that interact and create new spaces of translocal flows. Informal regionalism also is accompanied by the twin process of de-bordering and re-bordering, which reinforce borders as mutating spaces rather than fixed lines.

De-bordering is characterized by the shift in the role of borders from barrier to bridge, turning some marginal and remote border cities and regions into dynamic and networked centers and hinterlands. Re-bordering has entailed renewed state control over borders so as to stem the growing phenomenon of terrorism and other illegal crossings after 9/11. The coexistence of informal regionalism and de-bordering has produced a mosaic of extended and tightly linked borderlands, most noticeably in East and Southeast Asia (Chen 2009).

As borderlands are taking over from national borders as spaces of migration control due to informal regionalism and de-bordering, they begin to reorient the direction and composition of international migration. If the bridging role of borders generates rapid economic growth that spreads beyond the border zones to a greater borderland region, it will trigger a larger volume of cross-boundary population movement, especially jobseekers. While this does not necessarily translate into formal migration and permanent resettlement across borders, it adds new streams of people who move through borders in both directions in response to more convenient border crossing and improved transport infrastructure. Stronger border connections with uneven development on either side, however, may turn borderlands into newly contested terrains for illegal migration, spillover pollution, and other socioeconomic tensions. National and/or local states may re-impose border control, thus moving back toward the barrier role of borders, which in turn reduces cross-border migration, permanent or temporary (Chen 2005). So borderlands play a paradoxical role – in that even
as borders demarcate and attempt to regulate, they also help promote certain kinds of interaction and concentration of mobility. In the next section, several examples from East, Southeast, and South Asia are used to illustrate the role of borderlands in enhancing and diversifying migration.

Diverse Asian borderlands

The Hong Kong–Shenzen borderland

The first case is the borderland between Hong Kong and mainland China, particularly the Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong province. New economic linkages across this borderland emerged in 1979 when the establishment of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone right on Hong Kong’s border triggered the movement of its labor-intensive assembly operations over the border. Three decades later, a massive (re)division of labor between Hong Kong and Guangdong has become firmly entrenched. The blurring of the Hong Kong–Guangdong borderland has been intimately linked with the “miraculous” growth of Shenzhen from a small fishing town of less than 100,000 to a sprawling industrial city of about 12 million (Chen & de’Medici 2010). Hong Kong and Shenzhen have literally grown into each other and formed a cross-border metropolitan region of approximately 20 million people.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Chinese escaping the mainland for Hong Kong tried to swim across the narrow river and climb over the fence marking the heavily guarded border, and a small number of them made it. Today a huge number of people passes through several rail and road checkpoints everyday along the Hong Kong–Shenzen border, making the Luohu crossing-point China’s busiest land port for human traffic. On weekends and holidays, tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents ride the train and then walk through the crossing-points to shop, dine, and enjoy entertainment in Shenzhen. This pattern has reversed the flow of money and wealth that prevailed in the old days when Hong Kong residents would bring household electronics and daily necessities to their relatives and friends north of the border. A large number of Hong Kong residents have bought cheaper properties in Shenzhen as either an investment or a second residence. The purchases have contributed to property prices and the cost of living in Shenzhen rising to almost the highest level in China. More recently, owing to the continuously rising cost of living in Shenzhen, its wealthy residents began to cross the border to shop in Hong Kong.

The Greater Mekong Subregion

The second case refers to a set of borderlands within what is known as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which comprises Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, as well as Yunnan and part of Guangxi province of China. Given its larger spatial coverage and some of its intergovernment cooperative agreements such as the Mekong Water Commission, the GMS straddles the formal–informal divide of regional integration and encompasses multiple borderlands. Border trade constitutes the most important cross-border economic tie within the GMS. The 1990s and 2000s have seen the return of Yunnan province’s crucial historical role in border trade with its southern neighbors. Yunnan’s six border prefectures, which are geographically contiguous with Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, accounted for nearly all the provincial border trade through the 1990s and into the 2000s. The end of Chinese support before the collapse of the Burmese Communist Party in 1989 facilitated the opening of more border trading posts between the two countries. The Myanmar border town of Muse has been a vital link of border trade since the late 1980s (Chen 2005).

Border trade across the Mekong countries has been constrained by the lack of physical infrastructure, prompting the region’s national and local governments to improve it. They attach priority to roads, bridges, and ports to facilitate the movement of goods and people. In December 2006, Thailand and Laos opened a second bridge across the Mekong River, linking Mukdaharn province in northeastern Thailand to Laos’ southern province, Suwanakhet. Guangxi province began to build a second bridge on Beilun River on the border
with Vietnam as part of the new infrastructure to boost border traffic. In 2009, nearly 4.9 million people crossed the border, rising from about 4.6 million in 2008. Cambodia is in the process of opening three more border crossings with Vietnam as part of a plan to double the number of vehicles and tourists going through the border. Thanks to the seasonal identity cards issued by Cambodia’s Koh Kong province bordering Thailand, some Cambodian vendors can easily cross over to sell drinks and snacks to workers in the small seaport of Trat on Thailand’s eastern coast.

Two old borderlands in South Asia have exhibited new connections to migration. The borders of China and India have been drawn and redrawn a number of times under and since British colonial rule. The British Survey of India mapped the boundaries of Aksai Chin (marking the region at the junction of China, India, and Pakistan) and South Tibet in 1914 as the formal borderline called the McMahon Line – a thousand-kilometer line separating India (including South Tibet) and China. After independence in 1947, India continued to assert the British claim, which China disputed. In response to India’s reaction to the rebellion in Lhasa and Dalai Lama’s (1959) asylum in India, China fought a border war with India in 1962 and they skirmished again in 1967. On July 6, 2006 China and India (re)opened the Nathu La Pass (4,545m above sea level) between Tibet and the tiny state of Sikkim in northeastern India. Thousands of Indian pilgrims who used to make the annual 15-day journey to Tibet’s Mount Kailash, revered by Hindus as the home of Lord Shiva, can now do it in just a two-day drive. Given the remoteness, length (3,500 km), and harsh terrain of this borderland, the reach and control of the central governments are limited relative to local economic and cultural ties. The opening of border trade has reinforced the century-old tradition of co-mingling and migrations without much national allegiance along the China–India borderland (Banerjee & Chen, under review).

The India–Bangladesh borderland has lingering ties to colonial history and the post-Independence war of 1971. It also reflects the geopolitical similarities of the communities across the borders, and the influence of Kolkata (the most populous city in East India). It was created after the Partition of India in 1947 and known as the Indian–East Pakistani border prior to the war of 1971 between East and West Pakistan, which led East Pakistan to break away from Pakistan and become the independent nation-state of Bangladesh. Cross-border migration due to ethnic violence against both the Hindus and Muslims has continued since 1971, often bypassing the approximately 200 Indian and Bangladeshi enclaves on either side of the border whose creation goes back to a signed settlement in 1713 after a long war between the Cooch Behar and Mogul rulers (Jones 2010).

Economically underprivileged migrants from Bangladesh cross the border and often squat in towns and villages close to the border in West Bengal; many also migrate to Kolkata to explore more promising economic opportunities. Most of these migrants come to escape dire poverty, in search of work with the intention of returning when they have saved enough to go home. Illegal migrants often depend on existing social capital, of families and friends who have already migrated to find work in the region or in Kolkata. These migrants work in low-paid and unstable jobs such as daily-wage laborers, housemaids, janitors, and sanitation workers, among others. Given their legal and class location, Bangladeshi immigrants are subject to exploitation and oppression at the hands of employers as well as political authorities.

Many Muslim Bangladeshi women are forced to change their names to generic Indian female names to cover their identities as well as to find non-Muslim clients. The women often travel back and forth between the two countries, bribing the border security forces either with money or sex. In contrast, Indian migrant workers in Bangladesh work mostly in white-collar jobs or are small-business owners. While cross-border illegal immigration is constructed by some to be a problem, the history and cultural affinities of these borderlands render the barrier function of the border...
somewhat insignificant (Banerjee & Chen, under review).

A broader comparative perspective

These cases from across Asia illustrate a few salient features, both old and new, of the shifting borderlands and their connections to migration. Other borderlands beyond Asia shed additional light on the borderland–migration nexus with regard to the factors mentioned above. The long United States–Mexico boundary has been a broad, indistinct, and fluctuating borderland filled with historical and cultural ties, linguistic affinity, and ethnic and kinship networks. Fixed after the United States acquired Mexican territories and won the 1848 war with Mexico, this borderland became more integrated economically after the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect in 1994. Culturally speaking, the borderland has become Mexicanized north of the border and Americanized south of the border as a result of bilingualism and mutual cultural penetration. These old and new conditions have sustained a strong and steady flow of illegal migration from Mexico and beyond to the United States, despite the intensified border control after 9/11 and a rising anti-immigration sentiment, especially in US border states like Arizona. The tension and controversy about cross-border immigration is complicated by the periodic outbursts of violence associated with drugs that often spill in both directions beyond the borderline.

While many borderlands in the world are still rooted in their long histories and traditional social networks, a good number of them in Asia and elsewhere have been changing, some more drastically than others, due to the forces unleashed by both informal regional integration and de-bordering. On balance, change has weighed more heavily on these borderlands than inertia and has turned them into more open, connected, and contentious spaces. Despite being largely local or regional in scale and spread, some borderlands today have become increasingly global in economic and cultural relations. Much of this greater connectivity in and around borderlands, ironically, has been made possible by the rapid build-up of cross-border transport infrastructure. While these stronger physical connections have facilitated greater cross-border human interactions, they may fail to sustain the distinctive cultural and linguistic attributes of people living on either side of the border, such as the ethnic minorities of Yunnan and Guangxi provinces who are geographically adjacent to Myanmar and Vietnam.

As the new changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries reshape more and more borderlands with historical and cultural legacies, the latter exert a greater impact on migration, not so much by intensifying formal, legal migration as by enlarging the flow of temporary human traffic across borders. It poses an unprecedented challenge of governance to the state at a time when it appears to be increasingly eroded by the forces of both globalization and localization to control its more blurred national boundaries. This signifies a new point of departure for looking at the changing and more complex relationship between borderlands and migration in future research.

SEE ALSO: Borderlands and cultural bonds; Chinese urban migration and politics; Transnational families, research and scholarship; Transnationalism and cross-border migration; Urbanization and migration.

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References and further reading

