



ChinaMade Review

Rippa, Alessandro. 2020. *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development, and Control in Western China* (Amsterdam University Press).

Geoffrey Aung, January 2021

In recent decades, major infrastructure projects have proliferated across China's borderlands, from highways and economic zones to rail projects and pipelines. Although only some of these projects trace to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), first announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, BRI looms large in discussions of these projects. In popular discourse and policy research, BRI analysis tends towards epochal claims about a new world order, generalized "rise of China" themes, or schematic appraisals of heightened connectivity against the backdrop of China's expansive regional ambitions (Hillman 2020;

Maçães 2018; Miller 2019; Yong 2016). Scholarly literature, meanwhile, has often emphasized the cultural dimensions of BRI, conceptualizing BRI in terms of geocultural power, as a geopolitical culture itself, or through the cultural politics of infrastructure in China (Bach 2017; Lin, Sidaway, and Chih 2019; Winter 2019). Yet amid heightened interest in the cultural logics of BRI, sustained ethnographic research has been largely absent—and so too the roads and railways themselves, the actual economic zones and pipelines, all that which stand to materialize the connectivity BRI so dramatically promises.

Alessandro Rippa's (2020) *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development, and Control in Western China* addresses this gap. Bringing infrastructures themselves back into the discussions of China's changing borderlands, Rippa argues that the highways and economic zones of China's peripheries cannot be understood separately from the Chinese state's attempts to exert control in these areas, not least over minorities that include Uyghur Muslims. BRI, in fact, is only one of three tasks the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has set for itself to transform China's borderlands. The others are rural modernization and tourism development, both of which include programs and policies that precede BRI. Rippa emphasizes that while BRI is not to be underestimated, it would be a mistake to ignore the histories that come before it in these areas, especially histories of trade, exchange, and cross-border interconnection that new economic development projects aim to over-write through novel claims to transnational connectivity. Excavating such histories, Rippa finds that once-flourishing small-scale traders now struggle to survive, while ethnic minorities in China's west and south—in Xinjiang and Yunnan—face heightened state surveillance, securitization, and repression with new development projects.

Organized in thirds, the book begins by concentrating on cross-border trade along China's borders with Pakistan and Myanmar. Following traders from northern Pakistan in western China, Rippa foregrounds a tension between two notions of connectivity. On one hand, the Chinese state promotes would-be frictionless economic corridors that, officially, seek to restore ancient transcontinental trade relations encapsulated in Silk Road narratives. This is the connectivity of BRI, including the China-



The Karakorum Highway near Gilgit in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. (Image Source Wikimedia)

Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and, as Rippa explains here, the Kashgar Special Economic Zone (SEZ). On the other hand, traders like Karim, whose family from Pakistan owns businesses in Kashgar and Tashkurgan, have practiced a lived connectivity across borders for generations, stitching together the social worlds of Pakistan and western China. Rippa contends that the one notion of connectivity threatens the other. He shows how large-scale infrastructure projects—which bring with them, for instance, more stringent customs inspections at the

Pakistani border—enable the Chinese state to impose regulations that make it more difficult for small-scale traders to operate. In China’s southern borderlands, too, Rippa demonstrates how the private timber trade based in Tengchong—geared towards extracting teak from northern Myanmar—laid the basis for cross-border trade infrastructures now associated with BRI. Yet today, BRI and its proponents ignore—as they displace—those earlier forms of trade-based connectivity.

The second part of the book turns to the attempted re-making of minority subjectivities through a process Rippa calls “curation”: social and material interventions in China’s borderlands that seek to cultivate docile, disciplined minority subjects. In the Dulong Valley in Yunnan, a resettlement project increases the Drung minority’s dependence on the Chinese state, bolstering a narrative of national identity geared towards loyalty to the CCP. The road to the valley implies yet transcends the constructed remoteness of the area, which becomes a showcase of ethnic unity and rural modernization—dependency in the name of development, for Rippa (126). In Kashgar, meanwhile, the reconstruction of the city’s old town reflects a mode of heritage preservation that selectively excludes certain aspects of Uyghur-ness, especially those associated with Islam. The destruction and rebuilding of much of Kashgar’s old town aims to redefine Uyghur subjects according to the CCP’s vision of a commercialized secular modernity. In both cases, “curatorial” interventions destroy something in order to redefine it for display: the social worlds of the Drung minority, the cultural life of Uyghurs in Kashgar.

The last third of the book addresses two trade corridor projects, both associated with BRI: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor. Corridors, for Rippa, do not only facilitate the movement of goods, people, and capital. They are also technologies of containment and enclosure—technologies that “remove, block, and leave out what is outside of them with the aim of channelizing movement” (207). Thus CPEC promises an almost frictionless medium of cross-border trade, yet a deepening securitization regime targets, controls, and excludes Uyghurs, to the distinct advantage of Han Chinese companies and larger-scale Pakistani traders. Hence Xinjiang’s increasingly dense network of prison camps, police stations, checkpoints, and surveillance programs, which for Rippa are integral, not incidental, to the CCP’s pursuit of trade and development in western China. The BCIM, for its part, displaces smaller-scale timber traders, even as “corridor-isation” helps drive the incorporation of illicit practices into larger-scale, state-

backed businesses. With the decline of the timber trade, these businesses focus on the largely unregulated import of amber from Myanmar.

Interestingly, Rippa provides an account of infrastructure that productively departs from most treatments of the subject in recent years. Anthropology's "infrastructural turn," for instance, advances a core common sense: that infrastructures, foremost, are technologies of relation, connectivity, and commercial exchange (Dalakoglou 2016; Easterling 2014; Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001; Larkin 2008, 2013; Lefebvre 1991). This concept of infrastructure is not without traction in Rippa's ethnography. More acutely, however, infrastructures here come across as technologies of control, containment, and enclosure, as in Rippa's theorization of trade corridors. Foregrounding the violent work of large-scale infrastructures, Rippa challenges infrastructure scholars—albeit implicitly more than explicitly—to address not only forms of connective relation, but also the forms of control that can precede and subtend infrastructural connectivity.

Rippa's book is a notable achievement: it is the first extended ethnographic study of the infrastructure projects that have multiplied across China's borderlands in the age of BRI. Tacking back and forth between China's western and southern border areas, Rippa mainly cedes the ethnographic density of a conventionally bounded study. He attends instead to dynamics of movement and connection that unfold across time and space. Fittingly, some of the most important ethnographic moments occur in motion, as when Rippa drives through the Dulong Valley with a former road worker, or along the Karakoram Highway in Xinjiang, where eventually speed trap cameras dramatically slow the speed of Uyghur drivers. This is one way Rippa brings infrastructures themselves—the actual highways, for example—back into the story of China's changing borderlands and regional ambitions. But Rippa's central contribution is to refuse to separate these infrastructures—as vehicles for trade, development, and new visions of connectivity—from the forms of control exerted by the CCP in these areas in recent years. Rippa insists that China's borderland infrastructures and the CCP's repression of ethnic minorities, most prominently Uyghur Muslims, are fundamentally interconnected.

The nature of this interconnection raises questions, however. Rippa tends to distinguish and oppose the political and the economic, arguing that imperatives of political control—disciplinary and ideological, aimed at adjusting minority subjectivities to the Chinese state—underpin borderland infrastructure projects more than any economic motives. In the Dulong Valley, he finds a "political, rather than economic rationale" at work in the making of Drung dependency (134); state power in Kashgar projects "a disciplinary—and not economic—objective" in its curatorial interventions (141); and Xinjiang securitization measures project "a particular modality of development that privileges control over economic growth" (188). But political control can redound to economic expansion and vice versa. Researchers have found that Xinjiang, for one, has an important place in high-tech, surveillance-oriented modes of "carceral capitalism," as well as more conventional supply chains and production networks (Byler 2018, 2019; Franceschini and Loubere 2020; Hunerven 2019; Kelly 2020; Roche 2019; Xu et al 2020). The CCP might easily see its efforts to consolidate control over the borderlands, even at great cost, as part of a broader set of objectives that are significantly, if not exclusively, economic. Moreover, larger-scale economic actors, such as Han Chinese companies, have seized advantages with the marginalization of smaller traders, as Rippa notes himself. And major infrastructure projects are classical conduits for surplus capital, including in China, where the state actively funnels investment into infrastructure to help address crises of over-production (Chuang 2017; Danyluk 2017; Harvey 1982, 2003). At times, Rippa's privileging of the political over the economic risks obscuring more than it reveals.

The literature on logistics, security, and militarism, which Rippa engages briefly, might have suggested a different line of thought. Far from counterposing the political and the economic, this literature grasps logistics as a tumultuous site of capital mobility, state violence, and supply chain securitization (Chua et al 2018; Cowen 2014; Khalili 2020; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 2019). In this light, the CCP's attempts to exert control over trade in China's borderlands look less like a series of party-state imperatives, ostensibly un-economic, and more like part of a larger story about the dense imbrication of politics and economy in contemporary logistical systems. Indeed, Rippa attends closely to questions of state power, building a powerful critique of the CCP's actions in China's borderlands. If it is not simply the Chinese state that is at stake, however, but rather China's evolving role in wider circuits of capitalist production and circulation, then the political horizons of that critique might need to be more international (or even internationalist). With Xinjiang and Yunnan now "bridgeheads" to infrastructure investments in Myanmar, Pakistan, and beyond, the Chinese state may be too limiting as one's primary locus of critique.

Despite these concerns, *Borderland Infrastructures* is essential reading for anyone interested in BRI, infrastructure, and China's southern and western border regions. Cutting through simplistic claims about inclusive development, win-win outcomes, and frictionless trade, Rippa's view from the borderlands makes clear that these fantasies are predicated on violent forms of control. Ethnographically rich and theoretically engaging, the book will be particularly useful to anthropologists, geographers, and other social scientists invested in better understanding the uneven contours of China's contemporary regional ambitions.

Geoffrey Aung is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, where his research addresses race, capital, and postcoloniality in and along Myanmar's special economic zones and trade corridors.

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