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Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary-Making and Figured Worlds

Edited by Su-Ann Oh. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2016. 398 pp. US\$ 45.90. ISBN 978-981-4695-76-3.

The volcanic explosion, destructively eye-catching, focuses our attention on volcanic bombs—on boiling lava engulfing settlements and igniting conflagrations. Few of us are aware of the timescale and complex chemistry associated with the shifting of tectonic plates. So also eruptions of genocide and ethnic cleansing evoke ephemeral expressions of sympathy and innocent, superficial comment, without an understanding of historical precedence, ethnic hierarchies, imagined states, and the intercommunal grinding associated with apparently sudden shifts in the geopolitical development of regions—for example, Burma/Myanmar before, during, and since the colonial occupation.

The images of burning villages and desperate people as the Rohingya flee their homes in Rakhine State, Myanmar, and the subsequent judgment of Aung San Suu Kyi by international media are of the superstructure not the infrastructure. A rush to sympathize with, and less commonly help, the afflicted is humane and admirable. However, understanding takes longer, and those seeking an understanding of how the reification of the postcolonial Burmese nation state excluded the Rohingya will be informed and challenged by *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes*.

As the title suggests, this volume, replete with both theory and detail, has a wider focus than one theater of tragic ethnic animosity. The introduction and six sections research the cultural and economic

differentials between the central lowlands, the “padi states” of Myanmar, and the surrounding horseshoe of mountains, and between lowland Myanmar and its coastline to the west and south.

In the introduction, after an accessible and comprehensive overview of the physical, human, and political geography of the borderlands of Myanmar, the editor alerts us to a central theme: the “fact that mountain and maritime Myanmar have more in common with each other than with the lowlands, particularly in regard to their relationship with the state and to their connections with international neighbours” (p 27). Moreover, examining “the boundaries—geographical and constructed—of these regions provides us with an entrée into the figured worlds located therein” (p 27).

The following 6 sections provide the reader with many well-researched and, at times, helpfully overlapping entries into a better understanding of conflict between the Myanmar core and its periphery, and within and beyond the periphery. From Section I onwards, one recurrent theme is that the disparate peoples of the borderlands are isolated not only “from the centralizing force of Myanmar society” but also “by geography and sometimes instinct, from each other” (p 65). Yet “where strong connections exist in Myanmar’s borderlands they tend to pull, inconsistently, towards the neighbouring nation states” (p 65) as with the flight, into Bangladesh, of the Muslim Rohingya. They are separated from the Rakhine Buddhists by history and religion.

As Bjornberg suggests in Section II, “Geographically, Rakhine State and Bengal share many attributes that allowed them to form far more cohesive a territorial unit than Rakhine State and Myanmar” (p 147). But human geography and the territory of the imagined state, the political state (to paraphrase Seamus Heaney in *The Cure at Troy*), may not

rhyme and therefore will challenge the postcolonial idea of nations being “posited as cultural and historical entities” (p 149). The Buddhists of Rakhine State do not speak of “Muslims” but of *kala*, which means “people from the west” or “foreigner” (p 126)—people who, as de Mersan points out, usually occupied “a subaltern social position” (p 128). In contrast to other ethnic groups around the borderlands, “Buddhism cannot serve as a unifying factor here” (p 127), something which became more relevant from “the 1990s up until 2007 at a time when the Burmese military junta promoted Buddhism, to both strengthen its authority and legitimize its power” (p 127).

However, even where Buddhism is a unifying religion, the disparity between the imagined state—with its borderline secure on the map but not the landscape—and the reality of ethnic belonging is a source of conflict. Conflict promotes the acquisition of skills, allowing peoples like the Karen to survive on either side of the political border despite the “deprivation, ambiguity and precariousness that prevails in this region” (p 22). However, as Horstman and Oh point out in Section III, on the Thai side of the border, this uncertain survival takes place within another field of tension: that between a humanitarian economy providing support in health care, education, and social welfare and a prevailing neoliberal capitalist economy. The former, “fairly politicized and somewhat spiritual” (p 174), depends upon donor funding, and much of this, following the loosening of the grip of the Burmese junta, is leaving Thailand for Myanmar. This leaves ethnic minorities like the Karen and the Chin even more insecure and vulnerable.

The book also explores, in Section IV, how communications, from the mule caravan to the Internet, have produced a social and economic reality that transcends political boundaries. Creating cognitive maps (much more relevant to the fluidity of

movement, official and unofficial), this has helped develop a culture of “borderless-ness” culture within the frontier zones.

When people, such as the Karen/Kayin, Rohingya, Shan, and Karenni/Kayah, are displaced from their homelands, memory becomes even more important in constructing identity and in inventing “homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases” (Malkii 1992, quoted on p 25). The conflict between cultural memory, with the hope of a return, and the emerging political economic and military reality as the borders of nation states harden, is comprehensively explored in Sections V and VI. In these chapters, a strength is the use of qualitative data that explore the uncertainty in the minds of individuals and groups, in different border locations, as they either return or contemplate returning.

Economics, in both the legal and illegal economies, play a major role in the lives of those living in frontier zones. For example, following the 1986 ceasefire and a peace accord between the governments of India and Myanmar, an international trading zone was set up that has developed “an interdependent relationship between both legal and illegal trading” (p 358), with benefits for both the Chin and the Mizo—although the latter perceive the former as taking advantage and wished for their expulsion back to Myanmar. In contrast, Burmese monks are invited into Chinese villages for spiritual reasons and are pleased to go for economic reasons, as almsgiving is superior on the Chinese side.

This book is as diverse and complex in its approach as the borderlands it examines. This is not a criticism. There is a clear structure,

with each section building on and adding to our developing knowledge and understanding. Farrelly’s demographic statistics and maps in Chapter 2 lead to and illuminate the stories and interviews of later sections. Su-Ann Oh has brought together rich veins of research that singly have value but collectively make more accessible our understanding of the geography, people, and tensions within Myanmar’s frontier zones.

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