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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### Introduction to “**Bordering China: Modernity and Sustainability**”

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The papers in this issue of *Cross-Currents* grew out of a Berkeley workshop with the same title. They may not have much in common in terms of genre, discipline, project, or objective. Yet they share an attention to the material aspects of China, both in “China proper” and in the Chinese borderlands, including issues of resources, environment, and ecology in studies of history, politics, society, and economy. The papers, in short, seek to invest a certain agency in environmental factors. They also seek to demonstrate the reward of such an approach.

Peter Perdue’s thought-provoking essay, developed from his keynote speech, draws on studies of ecological systems to build a theory of historical studies of political systems. It seeks to describe a system in terms of phases of development, identifying the system’s attributes (“innovation,” “flexibility,” “openness,” “diversity,” and so forth) and linking them to a polity’s capacity for resilience. To apply the theory to practice, the essay outlines a comparative historical analysis of the Qing versus the postimperial Chinese nation-states, which includes a methodical comparison of the responses of the two (i.e., “empire” and “nation-state”) during major floods, famines, and wars. Is there a resource explanation for the Qing’s sharp decline in the nineteenth century, on the heel of a flourishing age of great power and prosperity? Does the newly reinvigorated Chinese nation-state, following decades of growth and development, face sudden collapse in the twenty-first century as the system becomes rigid, closed, depleted, and dependent? Will turning our attention to the material infrastructures of the Chinese empire compared with those of its successor states lead to new historical insights? These are among the big questions that Perdue’s essay raises.

Martin Saxer’s essay, by contrast, offers a close look at the economic decline of the mountainous Upper Humla region in northwestern Nepal on the border of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Two forces have long inscribed boundaries in this region: the Himalaya

mountains, with their forbidding height, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which has enforced China's territorial claims. The mountains have proven to be traversable: for centuries, numerous passes have sustained an intricate trading network centered upon the exchanges of salt and grain. And the PLA has been (surprisingly, Saxer argues) pragmatic enough since its arrival in the 1950s to grant controlled permissions to local travelers crossing national boundaries. Meanwhile, a third form of connection has been coming over the mountains in recent decades: earnest NGO workers trekking up for days after long international flights, lecturing with flip cards and colored charts to promote life-changing goods and ideas. Are the benefits of urban-imagined modernity dependent upon the attributes of a certain ecology? Do the mountains produce their own means and forms of alliance and resistance? Does altitude dictate the need for new approaches to sociology, history, or economy? Saxer provides no direct answers to these questions. But his compelling descriptions inspire us to take the conditions of the earth into serious account when approaching modernity.

Turning to other mountains, Jianxiong Ma draws on local archives to offer a close-up view of the historical formation of an ethnic minority, the Lahu, in the borderlands of Burma and Yunnan. The story begins with the flight of a Han sectarian leader from Qing authorities in the eighteenth century and his arrival in this region. A little over a century later, whole communities of warrior monks had come into being, dotting the mountains and forests with temples and tax-collecting stations. The Qing, to be sure, had wiped out comparable sectarian communities in the mountains of Jiangxi and Hunan. Yet in Yunnan the borderland politics and ecology appear not only to have contributed to the maintenance of the sects but also to have given rise to their ethnicity. Ma tells us that the zone of relative autonomy came to a rather abrupt end in the late nineteenth century upon the formal conclusion of a boundary treaty between the court in Beijing and the Kingdom of Burma. The Qing clarified its borderline and placed the region under the jurisdiction of a military administration. Remarkably—by Ma's account—the Qing, in its waning days of continental reach, was able to push its presence (somewhat effortlessly) into the Yunnan-Burmese borderland against the momentum of the expanding British Empire.

The Qing did not always do so well with its maritime borders, as historians have noted. Nor was China able to show much naval presence over the course of the twentieth century. Micah Muscolino examines the boundary disputes over territories in the South China Sea that flared during the 1970s. Drawing on diplomatic sources and newspaper reports, Muscolino

reconstructs the conduct of multiple nations—the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, and the United States—and the calculations of multinational corporations regarding the disputed waters. Before surveyor ships and drilling stations could operate to extract maritime resources, legal claims and national boundaries had to be established and internationally recognized. The essays by Ma and Muscolino drive home the contrasts between the paradigms of boundary making in continental versus maritime conditions—and the reward for research strategies that place human agency in the context of environmental agency.

*Wen-hsin Yeh is Richard H. and Laurie C. Morrison Professor in History at the University of California, Berkeley. She would like to acknowledge Professor Liu Tsui-jung, of the Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan, for partnership in organizing the August 2012 Berkeley Summer Research Institute on “Bordering China: Modernity and Sustainability,” where these papers were first presented. Yeh is also co-editor of Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review.*