Chapter Title: Introduction Neighbouring in the Borderworlds along China's Frontiers
Chapter Author(s): Juan Zhang and Martin Saxer

Book Title: The Art of Neighbouring
Book Subtitle: Making Relations Across China's Borders
Book Editor(s): Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang
Published by: Amsterdam University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1jd94h1.5

Introduction

Neighbouring in the Borderworlds along China's Frontiers

Juan Zhang and Martin Saxer

> For it is a simple matter to love one's neighbour when he is distant, but it is a different matter in proximity. – Jacques-Alain Miller (1994)

> A near neighbour is more helpful than distant kin. – A Chinese proverb

Over the past decades, living in proximity to an increasingly powerful China has gained new meanings. 'Rising China' – the nation, the notion, and the buzzword – sparks dreams and triggers fears. Borders that were closed during the Cold War era have again become zones of contact and exchange. Old trade routes are revived, new economic corridors established, and remote border towns turned into special zones. Tales of entrepreneurial success spread wide and stimulate hopes for trans-regional development. At the same time, security concerns remain high, territorial disputes still loom large, and minorities from northern Burma to Tibet, Xinjiang and Tajikistan continue to seek autonomy.

In this context, engaging in multiple neighbouring relations has become a necessity for those living in these zones of contact and exchange. The experiences and realities of relation-making across China's borders shape life in profound and lasting ways. However, these experiences and realities of everyday neighbouring receive less analytic attention than they deserve. Current debates on China's relations with its neighbours tend to focus on questions of economic influence, military power, and diplomatic strategies; both academic and public attention is directed towards topics such as China's territorial claims in the South China Sea or China's new regional initiatives such as 'One Belt One Road' (*yidai yilu* 一带一路) that aims to revive the Silk Road and gain influence in Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Smaller-scale processes of exchange along the 22,000 km of land borders that 14 countries share with China usually remain out of sight. At best, they make headlines as individual cases of economic success or political unrest; hardly ever are they put in relation to each other. Everyday interaction and exchange across the Himalayas, for example, is seldom seen against the background of similar experiences in Siberia or Burma.

The oversight of important everyday processes of neighbouring along the edges of Asia's rising powers, and the lack of a comparative framework to capture them, are the challenges this book seeks to address. This book starts with a simple question: What does China's rise mean for its immediate neighbours? Looking beyond extensive political analysis prepared by think tanks, and newspaper headlines on high level summits, trade deals, collaborations and disputes, this book presents lived realities of shared dreams and fears. Authors of this book bring forward a comparative framework that allows us to understand seemingly disparate processes in places as far apart as Kyrgyzstan and northern Vietnam as pieces of a larger puzzle. Rather than treating the frontier zones as remote peripheries at the edge of nation-states, we conceptualize them as crucial junctures that hinge a considerable part of Asia together. We argue that these junctures present a vantage point to see and understand the dynamic and ongoing reconfiguration of post-Cold War Asia in new ways.

Our aim with this book is thus two-fold. First, we seek to gain a better understanding of the contemporary cross-border relations at various scales. We look into everyday practices of exchange and interaction and ask what China's rise means for the people living on both sides of the borders, how their lives and futures are conditioned by the geopolitics of post-Cold-War Asia, and which strategies they employ to deal with new regimes of control and (partially) open borders.

Second, we propose neighbouring as an analytical notion for an anthropological inquiry into relatedness, competition, and ways of being in a world in which communities become increasingly mobile and connected. As it stands, neighbouring has remained an under-theorized social relation. While many forms of neighbouring are implicitly at the core of classic anthropological studies, they have mostly been discussed in terms of kinship (especially ethnographic writings of 'fictive kinship'), ethnicity, nation, class, caste or community. In other disciplines, neighbouring has not been studied in its own right, despite the fact that the term appears frequently in international relations (IR), politics, security studies and urban planning.

This book takes the experiences and politics of relation-making across China's borders as a starting point of an anthropological inquiry into neighbouring. Neighbouring is thereby understood as both agency and experience. It involves, at once, mental and material processes; it entails techniques of negotiating proximity and makes use of asymmetries in power and wealth; it informs desire and stimulates distrust; and it denotes

collective and individual efforts to manage evolving relations that we will call agonistic intimacies.

In this introduction, we first discuss how neighbours and neighbouring are defined, and trace the historical roots of neighbouring between China and its neighbours by looking into the meta-narrative of tributary relations and the question of governance and autonomy. Then, we situate the terrain of our inquiry in the borderworlds that straddle Chinese frontiers and sketch out the geopolitical transformation of post-Cold War Asia as the backdrop against which contemporary neighbouring unfolds. On the basis of this brief sketch of historical background and post-Cold War context, we explore the contemporary characteristics of neighbouring relations. We look into the politics of proximity and distance, and reflect on agonistic intimacies that define neighbours and neighbouring. We conclude this introduction with an overview of the chapters, showing how each of them helps illuminate the larger project of the book.

The Neighbour

Before we delve into an analysis of 'neighbouring' or even 'the art of neighbouring' as a shared experience and practice, it is important to first define who is a 'neighbour' and what it means to be a 'neighbour'. The term neighbour, derived from the old English word nēahgebūr – the peasant (gebūr) who dwells near (nēah) – suggests social relations based on the spatial proximity of fixities such as households or estates. In Chinese, neighbour, or *linju* (邻居) also describes social relations defined by living in close quarters. 'Lin' (邻) indicates a basic community unit of five households (*wujia weilin*五家为邻) according to *Shuowen*, (an early second-century Chinese dictionary from the Han Dynasty) that are adjacent to one another. The neighbour is often associated with friendliness and kindness, a sense of connectedness and shared responsibility. Neighbourly relations are thus often thought of as being equal, respectful, and mutually helpful. The Chinese proverb 'a near neighbour is more helpful than distant kin' (*yuanqin buru jinlin* 远亲不如近邻) describes precisely the kind of intimate relations between near neighbours. Much of the current IR scholarship and political analysis continues to evaluate China's 'Good Neighbour Diplomacy' through this seemingly innocent notion (for example Zhu 2010).

However, neighbours and neighbouring are never innocent or simple. It may be easy to 'love one's neighbour when he's distant', just as

Jacques-Alain Miller (1994) describes, but it is a different matter in proximity. Uradyn Bulag's writing (Chapter 5, this volume) on Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour Diplomacy' offers some interesting insights on the politics of proximity, equality, and 'friendship' in neighbouring situations. Mongolia is a country endowed with world-class coal, copper and uranium deposits. It is also a country wedged between two mighty neighbours – China and Russia. Both neighbours have a strong interest in exercising influence and extracting natural resources from Mongolia. As a counter strategy, Mongolia chooses to seek support among potential 'third neighbours', particularly the United States of America (USA) and Japan. As a small state, Mongolia is willing to share its 'fortune sovereignty' – mainly its rich natural resources – with its neighbours both near and far as a means of balancing power positions and influence. For Mongolia, far 'neighbours' such as the USA and Japan, and now increasingly member countries of the European Union, may be much more lovable than close neighbours Russia and China. But it also borrows strength and support strategically from Russia and China in a moment of need. The case of Mongolia shows the kind of complicated and strategic relations between neighbours.

Indeed, there are neighbours who live in close proximity, and neighbours who are worlds apart. There are neighbours that are strong, and neighbours that are weak. There are neighbours who are cooperative and friendly, and neighbours who are disrespectful and obnoxious. The neighbour is always a familiar presence. But one never knows who the neighbour really is and what the neighbour might do in different times and situations. Just as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it: 'there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness beneath the "neighbour"' (Žižek 2005: 143). Veena Das (2007) in her writing about the 1984 massacre of Sikhs in India demonstrated that some neighbours are capable of turning into unexpected traitors and murderers. There is always a looming suspicion about neighbours, who they really are and what they can do, which challenges the popular imaginaries of neighbourly harmony and equality. The neighbour therefore is a complex figure that is both intimate and suspicious. This paradoxical characteristic about the neighbour renders neighbouring an inherently paradoxical and unstable experience, one that needs constant negotiation, reinforcement, commitment, and performance of innocence and good-will. The art of neighbouring thus entails collective sensibility and situated practicality where neighbours carefully manage their relations and negotiate shifting power positions.

Neighbouring: Maintaining Closeness Near and Far

As the neighbour is a figure of ambivalence, neighbouring as an experience and a daily practice is also fraught with ambivalence and contradictions. By definition, neighbouring indicates close relations that are often determined by spatial fixities – dwellings, estates, and households; but these seemingly 'fixed' relations can be surprisingly elastic or fluid.

Today, when we talk about neighbouring relations between nation-states, a sense of closeness is often measured by how different bodies are brought together in immediate contact – often at border crossings, via bridges and roads, in special zones, dry ports, and marketplaces. These physical locations seem to suggest that interactions of neighbours are always confined by spatial fixities and, as a result, the patterns of such close-contact interactions are bounded and predictable.

However, we show in this book that neighbouring does not necessarily imply fixed engagement and predictable interaction. Authors of this book pay attention to movements and the fluidity of social situations. Neighbouring can take the form of periodical encounters, or it can emerge from an initially close contact that continues to be maintained across distance. Neighbouring may also take place far away from the national borders but still remain functionally linked to particular opportunities and risks presented by locations, just as Bulag's chapter on Mongolia demonstrates (Chapter 5, this volume). Another case in point is the bazaar traders in Bishkek and Almaty described by Henryk Alff (Chapter 4, this volume). Alff shows how the closeness of neighbouring relations does not correlate with spatial fixities. After the opening of the borders between China and Central Asia in the 1990s, local shuttle trade was the predominant form of cross-border engagement. Later on, wholesale traders gradually took over and the zones of contact moved away from the immediate borders to the more distant bazaars of Bishkek and Almaty. Close relations with traders in China however remain active and meaningful. The rhetoric of trust is established in this particular situation to facilitate processes of 'neighbouring at a distance'. It consolidates partnerships, maintains ties, and to a certain extent resolves disputes.

In one way or another, proximity, or 'closeness', remains a condition for neighbouring. However, this 'closeness' cannot be measured in kilometres or miles. It does not describe a static constellation but a relatively malleable condition; it indicates that one has entered a state of being with others and has to bear subsequent social and political implications. Neighbouring, in this sense, is diligent 'border work' (Reeves 2014) that stretches across

spaces near and far. Moreover, such closeness by no means implies equality or harmony. In fact, asymmetry and tension are far more characteristic for neighbouring than harmony and equality. The spectre of violence all to easily come to haunt even longstanding neighbours, as, for example, Lee Ann Fujii's exemplary study of the chaos and killing during the horrific genocide in Rwanda in the mid-1990s shows (Fujii 2009). Collective violence and profound sympathy are often bred together in closeness. In extreme conflicts, some neighbours commit mass violence against people they know intimately, as others become protectors.

Neighbouring is an inherently unstable and unpredictable social relation. Compared to kinship, for example, it is less firmly rooted in incontrovertible moralities. It is precisely for this reason, one could argue, that the rhetorical invocation of good neighbourliness so often employs the language of kinship. But firm invocations of a brotherly bond or other familial ties always risk to be seen as just that – rhetorical strategies that seek to hide the disharmony embedded in closeness inherent in neighbouring relations.

Neighbouring: Contesting Intimacies

Neighbouring entails a particular form of intimacy, one that is neither radically antagonistic nor particularly harmonious under ordinary circumstances. On the one hand, neighbours continue to rely on closeness to seek common ground and mutual interest; on the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that neighbouring relations may one day turn into open enmity, when borders close, ambassadors are withdrawn, and people become refugees. There is constant subterranean tension that haunts neighbourly relations as anxiety and doubts co-exist with friendly gestures and vows of trust. Neighbouring describes relations that entail what Bhrigupati Singh (2011) calls 'agonistic intimacy', which can be both unsettling and productive.

Singh's concept brings together the notion of contest (*agon* in Greek) with the idea of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005). It helps make sense of situations in which conflict remains 'co-present with modes of relatedness' and shared aspirations (Singh 2011: 431). Such situations are very common in the borderworlds this book is concerned with. Despite xenophobic suspicions and envious gazes in Siberia, the lingering fears of disruption and instability in the margins of India, the continuing anxiety in northern Vietnam, or new asymmetries in the Himalayas, agonistic intimacies define what it means to live in each other's proximity.

Neighbourly agonism operates at both local and transnational scales, activating antagonism and inspiration at the same time. It threatens relations but also consolidates ties. This is what Bonnie Honig calls the 'affirmative dimensions of contestation' (Honig 1993: 15). When borderland communities compete for resources, rights, status and power, it is often the perpetuated contest itself that becomes the foundation of 'neighbourly' intimacy. The 'in-betweenness' of borderworlds, as Chris Vasantkumar calls it (chapter 7, this volume), fosters both ruthless capitalist competition and surprising solidarities at the same time.

Juxtaposing both imaginaries of harmony and what Žižek calls the 'unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness', we focus on the plurality of relations and actions in the contact zones between China and its neighbours (Pratt 1991). We turn our focus on what makes neighbours embrace shared dreams, voice similar doubts, and take similar precautions. We argue that it is not the 'distinct features' of neighbours at the margins – whether cultural, primordial, or a response to state oppression – that matter most, but the specific agonistic intensities rooted in the positionality of neighbouring relations and the skills to mediate and make use of them.

Neighbouring: Negotiating Asymmetries

Another key characteristic of neighbouring relations is the innate power asymmetries between neighbours that are in need of constant balancing and negotiation. These acts of balancing and negotiation often become the foundational terms of engagement. Rather than equals, neighbours occupy different power positions and are in constant motion to challenge or overturn, maintain or take advantage of the inherent power imbalances.

The earlier patterns of neighbourly engagements between China and its neighbours were most famously theorized by the venerable historian John King Fairbank and his followers as a 'tributary system' (*chaogong tixi* 朝贡体系).[1] Simply put, the 'tributary system' is a meta-narrative that postulates a sinocentric view of neighbourly interaction among pre-modern polities: China, as the superior power and civilization, is placed in the centre; its neighbours are situated at various scales of peripheriality. As subordinates, they pay tribute to the empire to show reverence and allegiance. In

---

1   Feng Zhang points out that the term 'tributary system' is a Western invention, which is translated back into Chinese as *chaogong tixi*. The terms *chao* and *gong* often appear separately in Chinese historical sources, but they did not form a 'system' as such; See Zhang (2009).

exchange, they are granted trade rights and protection, and are bestowed with gifts, investiture, and royal acknowledgement, through which, in turn, the emperor reinforces his authority and legitimacy as the benevolent, celestial ruler ordained (Fairbank 1968, Kang 2010).

Trade, in particular, was an important imperial technique in pacification and peacekeeping. Reserved as an exclusive entitlement to the tribute states that swore allegiance and loyalty to the central empire, trade became useful in ruling frontiers, consolidating allies, and maintaining the regional order (Frank 1998, Hamashita 2008, Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). Trade and tribute were deemed to be 'cognate aspects of a single system of foreign relations' – 'the moral value of tribute being the more important in the minds of the rulers of China, and the material value of trade in the minds of the barbarians' (Fairbank and Teng 1941: 140-141).

Fairbank's conceptualization of the tributary system in pre-modern Asia gained tremendous popularity and influence in the 1960s. As archetypal 'Chinese world order' and model for Chinese diplomacy it had a lasting effect on IR scholarship and the social sciences. However, its unabashed sinocentric views, essentializing frameworks, and simplistic understanding of the dynamic practices of trans-empire engagements also attracted considerable criticism (see e.g. Hamashita 2005, Hevia 1995, Rossabi 1983, Wang 1983, Wills 1988, 2001).

Fairbank and his followers portrayed pre-modern China as an 'empire without neighbours' (Fairbank and Twitchett 1980: 182), in the sense that China was surrounded by foreigners who were mostly 'barbarians' and who could only be dealt with by enforcing the strict terms of tributary interaction. Critical historical accounts, however, contradict this view and show that the modes of interaction between China and its neighbours varied drastically with ever changing motivations, ambitions, and interests (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006, Giersch 2006, Hevia 1995, Lary 2008, Perdue 2005, Rossabi 1983, Shin 2006).

During periods when pre-modern China was powerful and stable, formal tribute relations may have determined much of the asymmetrical but predictable terms of engagement between China and its surrounding polities. However, these terms did not necessarily mean that the 'smaller' neighbours were disadvantaged in interaction. The Mongols, for example, fully exploited their intermittent tributary relations with the Ming empire for not only gaining wealth and protection, but also for their own interests in defeating rival polities and expanding power on the steppe (Serruys 1967). The institutionalization of tribute relations neither elevated China's anxiety towards its neighbours' willingness to submit, not did it ease the

hostility and suspicion that these neighbours felt towards China. (For contemporary examples of neighbourly anxieties under friendship diplomacies, see Chapters 1 and 9 in this book).

During periods when China was weakened by internal unrest, wars, and famine, neighbouring practices at the state level turned out to be extremely flexible and pragmatic. The political and military weakness of the Song dynasties, for example, was translated into a more realistic foreign policy when Chinese imperial officials treated neighbouring states as their equals (Rossabi 1983). In many circumstances when state-level interactions ceased to operate, unofficial connections persisted through trade and exchange (Hamashita 2005, Swope 2002).

In brief, the tributary system does explain certain patterns and politics, but as Feng Zhang nicely put it, 'much of the interesting interaction between China and its neighbours occurred outside of it' (Zhang 2009: 562). The scholarly works of Eric Tagliacozzo and Takeshi Hamashita, for example, clearly demonstrate that pirates and labourers had just as profound an effect on pre-modern Asian geopolitics as the state, and everyday interactions that took place at state peripheries played a pivotal role in shaping regional and global networks (Hamashita 2008, Tagliacozzo 2009, Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011).

Today, no one would describe China's interactions with its neighbours through the framework of tributary relations. What dominates the public discourse now is the so-called 'Good Neighbourly Diplomacy' and mutual development. But China's discourse of the 'peaceful rise' is still reminiscent of the past rhetoric of tributary interactions (Wills 2011). As a modern twist of 'ruling by virtue', China is believed to be exercising its regional influence through what Joseph Nye (2004) calls 'soft power'. Trade, and perhaps now 'development', continues to be a state technique that aims at 'benevolent governing' and the insurance of peace and order in the frontiers.

Inherent in this new phase of sinocentrism is still the old lens through which China's neighbours are viewed. No longer 'barbarians', they are now called or thought of as 'under-developed' nations, weak states, hill tribes, and minority nationalities. Today, the imperial image of barbarian tribes to be civilized or subdued may have given way to a more benign rhetoric of development and cultural preservation; however, the underlying dialectic of neighbouring relations between asymmetric powers continues to be relevant.

China's rise in recent decades has indeed reconfigured new asymmetries and modes of engagement in Asia; but we believe that the resulting realities can only be understood if we take into consideration local meanings and

situated encounters. Just as the model of the 'tributary system' in itself is incapable of explaining the complex dynamics of China-foreign interactions in the past, China's 'peaceful rise' and its exercise of 'soft power' falls short in exemplifying contemporary China-foreign relations. It cannot capture the multiplicities of relations and evolving politics between China and its neighbours. A more productive approach, we believe, is to look beyond analysis that originates from the powerful 'centre' and start focusing instead on the peripheries.

Neighbouring: Engaging the Margins

To shift our focus to the peripheries, it is worthwhile to examine, first and foremost, how the peripheries are defined and mapped, by whom, and for whose interest this has been normalized and naturalized as if it represents social reality. Classification, masked as objective science and carried out with utmost authority by power centres, is a project that conditions and perpetuates power asymmetries.

A common feature of most of the peripheries of nation-states is the imposed and often arbitrary classification of their inhabitants as 'ethnic groups', 'hill tribes' or 'minority nationalities'. This classificatory enterprise, which already underpinned the political projects of Chinese, Russian, and British imperial expansion, was eagerly adopted by modern nation-states and continues to resonate with popular imaginaries of the 'remote' and 'tribal' both in the East and the West (see, for example, Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006, Harrell 1995, Lary 2008).

The enterprise of ethnic classification represents one dimension of neighbouring, namely between elites in mostly national centres of power claiming civilizational superiority and their archetypal Other in the periphery. Inherent in this enterprise is a particular conceptualization in which the remote becomes the location of the Other, whose 'strangeness' and imagined 'isolation' justify the dominant political structure of power.

One of the most radical attempts to shift attention away from centres and look instead at margins is James Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), which he describes as an 'anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia'. Following van Schendel (2002), Scott uses the term Zomia for the uncharted contact zones between the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Southwest China. Scott takes socio-linguistically diverse Zomia not as a conglomerate of primordial tribes, but as the result of flexible communities who consciously 'opted out' of state rule. Until the advent

of roads and airplanes, he argues, the mountainous areas along much of the present day borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) served as refuge for those who chose a lifestyle different from lowland civilizations. According to Scott, the 'tribes' in the mountains are thus a result of in-migration and ethnogenesis, an effect of oppressive taxes and corvée obligations in the valley states. Turning the idea of cultural determinism on its head, Scott frames the distinctive features of hill societies, including swidden agriculture, millenarian movements, a relatively egalitarian social structure, and oral instead of written histories, as deliberate mechanisms to 'escape' state authority. In Scott's model of Zomia, seeking refuge is the motive that characterizes relation-making between lowland centres and highland margins.

Scott's provocative and sharp reflections on upland agency are insightful and relevant for the project at hand. However, they explicitly deal only with the pre-World War II era and concern but a section of our terrain of inquiry. Moreover, we also find Scott's thesis neglecting a crucial dimension that is necessary to understand the dynamics in the borderworlds described in this book. While 'opting out' is certainly one motivation that brought (and continues to bring) people to the rugged peripheries, other equally strong motivations were and are the manifold opportunities found in borderworlds – be it in trade, natural resources or tourism (Giersch 2006, 2010, Kolås 2008). The motive of 'seeking fortune', for example, has been at least as important as the motive of 'seeking refuge'.

Fortune seeking, however, is tied to connectivity and exchange rather than to remoteness and isolation. In this context, 'not being governed' indicates a particular relational politics that is often rather a matter of skilfully mediating the presence of strong outside powers than openly escaping them. In other words, 'not being governed' while still engaging in active exchange relations often does imply a certain amount of being governed – at least nominally. What is at stake is rather a strategy of not being governed too much or too rigidly. As openly opting out of state powers became increasingly difficult after World War II, this mode of skilful neighbouring with the intention of being nominally but flexibly governed is arguably even more important today. This is how remote and 'underdeveloped' – even 'backward' – peripheries get tax deductions and flexible policies, how they build roads and power grids, how they establish special zones and economic belts, and become sites of eco-tourism and heritage preservation. 'Governing' is a notion too rigid to describe the malleable, contested, situational strategies that local societies use to mediate the presence of strong power. We propose that 'neighbouring' can better describe

how power asymmetries are managed at the local level. It indicates an interactive process, often with unpredictable results. Unlike 'governing', it does not assume superiority or hegemonic control. It simply describes the relational interaction of power players and how they engage with each other with their own agency, resourcefulness, and performativity.

The performance of loyalty and harmony combined with a strong emphasis on visual appearances are crucially important in neighbouring relations this respect, as several of the contributions in this volume suggest. Pál Nyíri (Chapter 2), for example, describes how the ceremonies, banners and even the uniforms of security guards in a privately owned Special Economic Zone at the border in northern Laos mimetically replicate the paraphernalia of the Chinese state. This form of posturing bears similarities to the Zomian strategies of appeasing lowland states that Scott describes (Scott 2009: 7-11). The difference is that establishing a Special Economic Zone requires close contact with state authorities. Today, posturing and rhetoric only work as long as there is legal endorsement and high-level official support. Essentially, the art of (not) being governed in the peripheries is about managing power asymmetries and organizing multiple relations at the margins. This is what we call the art of neighbouring.

Neighbouring in the Post-Cold War World

The geography of contemporary social life, Willem van Schendel (2002) aptly remarks, has outgrown the contours of the postwar world map. New and possibly discontinuous 'regions', such as 'lattices, archipelagos, hollow rings, or patchworks' need to be visualized to overcome the 'contiguity fetish of prevailing regional schemes' (van Schendel 2002: 658). The borderworlds along China's edges – as the terrain of inquiry this book proposes – is reminiscent of such an archipelago or a hollow ring. The majority of processes and events analysed in the ten chapters of this book cut across the territorial boundaries of nation-states and the artificial lines that demarcate area studies disciplines. In this way, this volume seeks to transcend 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) and shed light on the 'geographies of ignorance' (van Schendel 2002) at the fringes of nation-states and disciplines.

This book does not ignore the relevance of national geographies; instead, it 'jumps scales' (ibid.) and assembles large regions across Southeast, South, Central, East and Far East Asia into a 'world area' that was and still is at the heart of state formation. Given the fact that mobile communities

existed before any modern states were formed (Ludden 2003), we consider neighbouring not as a geographically bounded experience, but as sets of overlapping relations that are subject to movement and change. Neighbouring, as we understand it, entails both a geographical reality of living in proximity, and a flexible construction of social relations that can be stretched across time, space, and distance. The stories of Tibetan returnees in Amdo, Tibet (Vasantkumar, Chapter 7 of this volume), for instance, show that borderworld interactions between mobile actors require a more widely drawn geography. Thus, the configuration of neighbouring relations in our inquiry has less to do with geographically bounded areas 'neighbouring each other'; it rather concerns a social topography of communities and connections as people migrate and stay. The peripheries portrayed in this book are worlds in motion, and the art of neighbouring is almost always tied to changing social relations as people and things move.

When we depict neighbouring as a shared experience and a common reality in the peripheries along China's edges, we mostly focus on the contemporary conditions of this experience in the context of post-Cold War geopolitics in Asia. Large parts of China's contemporary land borders are the result of imperial and colonial claims and treaties (Woodman 1969). The red lines drawn on modern maps often arbitrarily separated territories and peoples. Before World War II, such artificial borderlines were often cast as irrelevant and had little to do with everyday realities on the ground (Lary 2008). Frontiers and contact zones were under fuzzy sovereign rule and mostly beyond the administrative reach of central powers. Since the 1950s, however, this situation changed. The newly founded nation-states set out to militarize frontier zones with clearly demarcated borders. The fuzzy territories of erstwhile empires were turned into carefully guarded zones of national sovereignty. A series of border disputes and armed conflicts between China and its neighbouring nation-states ensued, most notably with India (1962), the Soviet Union (1969), and Vietnam (1979). These conflicts resulted in a period of curtailment and closure at China's edge. Longstanding ties and formal networks of exchange were severed considerably; in some cases, former neighbours turned into bitter enemies.

After the end of the Cold War, and especially since China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the political sensitivities of borders, while still lingering, were gradually superimposed by expectations of prosperity. In this context, drastic changes took place across the borderworlds. Sino-Vietnamese relations were normalized in 1992. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001. Border disputes between Russia and China were mostly resolved in 2004. The Nathula Pass

between Sikkim and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) reopened in 2006. Railways and road networks were expanded into territories that were formerly difficult to access. Casinos, mines and rubber plantations emerged. And new pipelines, dams and power grids were built to channel energy into these zones of development (Diana 2009, Garver 2006, Harris 2008, Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011, Nyíri and Breidenbach 2008, Zatsepine 2008).

A quarter of a century after 1989, notions of 'opening up' and multilateral collaboration have mostly replaced the ideological framework of containment – if not by choice then by public demand or perceived economic necessity. Stimulated by this momentum, frontier communities that were used to orient themselves toward Moscow, Delhi, Hanoi, or Kathmandu started looking toward China for new connections. Simultaneously, people within China directed their gaze to the border zones in search of emerging opportunities (Zhang 2011).

From tributary relations in the past to contemporary practices of (not) being governed, people, networks, and even institutions act upon multiple scales. China's rise in recent decades has produced new modes of engagement in Asia; however, the resulting realities can only be understood if we take into consideration local meanings and situated encounters.

When Veena Das wrote about the remaking of selves in the realm of the everyday, she showed that it is revealed not by grand gestures of transformation, but through a 'descent into the ordinary' (Das 2007: 7). Celebratory state policies and ambitious international frameworks aside, neighbouring is inherently such a descent into the ordinary and the everyday, at the interstices of multiple relations and dynamic actions. It is important to keep a critical distance from sino- or eurocentric views and the veiled sense of moral superiority embedded in both Chinese 'peaceful rise' discourse and Western 'development' rhetoric. What is at stake, instead, is to bring to light the multiplicities and complexities of relation-making in the borderworlds at China's edge. In this sense, this book aspires to offer parallax views and multilayered perspectives.

Structure of the Book

The ten contributions in this volume are structured in three sections to illuminate three aspects of neighbouring described above. The first section explores the emergent borderworlds in the context of China's rise and opening-up. Examples from Siberia, the Himalayas and northern Laos show the gamut of 'neighbouring China' in a post-Cold War context. These

examples also shed light on the dialectics of centres and margins, as well as how neighbours forge relations through drastic social change.

Chapter 1 by Franck Billé, opens with an emblematic image of this neighbouring situation: the residents of the Siberian city of Blagoveshchensk gaze across the Amur River and see the bright and sparkling neon lights of Heihe, a border town in north-eastern China. Two decades ago, Heihe was a dark village at China's periphery; now it is a booming hub thanks to border trade. Heihe's neon lights, which allegedly run on cheap Russian electricity, render the ambivalence that Blagoveshchensk residents felt towards China visible. At Russia's edge, they feel neglected and far removed from the centre. And the transformation of Heihe seems to suggest a different possibility for a city at the nation's margin. For some of the Blagoveshchensk residents, the sparkling lights in Heihe symbolize the problems of neighbouring China; for others, they signal the ushering in of a new kind of modernity associated with China's economic confidence. The lights beckon a future where everything seems possible but, at the same time, also provide a reflection on current asymmetries. Billé explores both the friction between the twin cities and the ways in which they mimetically refer to each other.

The importance of visual appearances and mimicry in the art of neighbouring is also a topic in Pál Nyíri's account of two casino complexes in northern Laos. Both complexes were established as Special Economic Zones by Chinese entrepreneurs on leased land on the Lao side of the Lao-China border. Nyíri shows how the zones' management deploys 'simulacra of development' and the 'paraphernalia of the Chinese state' to position themselves favourably between Laos and the PRC. Although the zones are dependent on gambling and prostitution for revenue, their ambitions are couched in images of spearheading modernity. These images tie in with the development agendas of both states and, at once, keep them at arms length. While in one casino zone the strategy seems to work, in the other it fell out of favour with the Chinese authorities and witnessed a rapid decline.

A pervasive rhetoric of development also forms the backdrop against which recent changes in northwestern Nepal have to be understood. Martin Saxer describes in Chapter 3 how fervent Chinese road construction on the Tibetan Plateau in the name of the Great Western Development Scheme, and the extension of some of these roads across the border into Nepal, have spurred a drastic re-orientation of the Himalayan valleys toward Tibet and the PRC. With goods, and increasingly also food, being imported from China rather than flown into the mountains from Nepal's lowland centres, seasonal *entrepôts* near the border emerge as zones of engagement and intensive neighbouring. But despite the obvious boom (and the occasional

bust), the roads to China are not just the harbingers of modernity that put an end to the last enclaves of Himalayan tradition, as it is often purported. Rather than leading to modernity, Saxer argues, local communities see the roads as much as ways back to the long tradition of trans-Himalayan trade associated with memories of prosperity.

The three chapters in this first section provide snapshots that show the facets of the contemporary dynamics of neighbouring China along its borders. The contributions weave together several threads. In all three cases, spectacular asymmetries have recently resurfaced, leading to raising stakes in the art of neighbouring. Against the background of the omnipresent rhetoric of rapid development, fervent economic activity with a certain boom-and-bust quality has come to shape the borderworlds. Mimetic strategies and 'cosmological bluster' stand for the politics of appearances in this context.

The second section of the book looks into transnational neighbouring relations that are less directly tied to the spectacles of spatial proximity near an international borderline. Proximity, as argued above, is a matter of managing intimacy and physical as well as symbolic distance. Borderworlds as zones of engagement may reach beyond the immediate borderline. Based on the observation that neighbouring is not necessarily tied to a sedentary setting, neighbouring is practiced as a strategy of orientation and situated intimacy. It also entails the entanglements of fixities and mobilities. Neighbouring – enabled by 'jumping scales' (van Schendel 2002) – connects across regions and ties geopolitics to the very local and material. The chapters in this section provide three different perspectives on these aspects of neighbouring.

Henryk Alff (Chapter 4) discusses the dynamic reconfiguration of social relations in the context of trade between China and Central Asia. What started in the early 1990s with local shuttle traders has since reached an entirely different scale. The vast bazaar complexes of Bishkek and Almaty function as hubs for the import of Chinese goods and their distribution throughout the former Soviet Union. As transportation became more and more professionalized and wholesale businesses replaced shuttle traders, the zones of engagement moved away from the actual borderline to the back offices of the bigger players. Neighbouring relations are now managed over distance. However, the recently established Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan's anticipated entry, fundamentally change the situation again. Local shuttle trade between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for example, has regained a certain importance as it allows traders to circumvent the new customs rules for wholesale imports. Alff's

chapter shows the elasticity of neighbouring relations and the multiple scales on which it operates.

Uradyn Bulag's analysis (Chapter 5) of Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour' diplomacy adds another twist to neighbouring as a multi-scalar endeavour of negotiating distance and proximity. Endowed with world-class coal, copper and uranium deposits, in which both of its two mighty neighbours – China and Russia – have a strong interest, Mongolia chose to seek support among potential 'third neighbours', particularly the USA and Japan. To become a neighbour, Bulag argues, means to be oriented to someone's 'fortune sovereignty', thereby becoming a force to be reckoned with. As a small state, Mongolia is strategically employing 'smart power'; it is willing to share its 'fortune sovereignty' with its neighbours near and far as a means of managing proximity and distance. The ceremony of presenting precious gift horses to foreign dignitaries thereby plays an important symbolic role. However, not all neighbours seem to understand the symbolic ties between the fine horses (meant to roam freely in the vast steppes rather then being taken home) and the territorial logic of mining tenders.

Mobility and fixity are also the topic of Tina Harris' reflections (Chapter 6) on the mobile and the material. Neighbouring, Harris argues, is mediated through pathways and their disruptions. Harris examines the construction and use of borders and roads between China and India. She reexamines the meanings of tension that arise between those who set the borders and those who move the borders, those who map the paths and those who create alternative routes. Just as active neighbouring is a matter of managing distance, managing distance is a matter of dealing with mobilities and fixities.

The final section of the volume investigates neighbouring as social relations of 'agonistic intensities'. In Chapter 7, Chris Vasantkumar traces the stories of Tibetan refugees from Amdo in north-eastern Tibet who returned to China and started doing businesses. As new arrivals they were regarded as overly sinicized and outsiders in exile; back in Tibet they are watched with much scrutiny. Moving from one neighbouring situation to the next, they remain somehow always in-between. They are 'odd' in the sense that one cannot hold them concurrently in view with either 'proper exiles' (seeking refuge rather than fortune) or their Han Chinese neighbours in Gansu and Qinghai.

Leaving one contentious neighbouring situation behind for another is also what characterizes the cases of Burmese Muslims in China that Renaud Egreteau presents (Chapter 8). Seeking both refuge and fortune across the border in Yunnan, which is considered a safer environment

than authoritarian and Buddhist-dominated Myanmar, Burmese Muslims establish new livelihoods in the jade industry of the bustling Yunnanese border towns. Here, they manage to make use of their social networks in Myanmar while at the same time find entry into the Hui Muslim society in Yunnan. In this sense, they move from being inessential neighbours in their Burmese homeland to being essential neighbours in the context of cross-border trade in precious stones. Agonistic interplays rather than open antagonism characterize the situation.

Agon – or contest – is also at the heart of Juan Zhang's analysis (Chapter 9) of the tensions during a high-level bilateral trade fair at the Sino-Vietnamese border. As the Vietnamese imposed extra duty on Chinese goods unexpectedly at the fair, Chinese traders at the border experienced the fragility of bilateral trade relations, and the uncertainty of cross-border interactions. Such tensions and the anxiety it triggers, Zhang argues, are always the undercurrent of neighbouring relations. Neighbouring in anxiety speaks to the agonistic intimacy that can be both unsettling and productive. Uncertainty triggers anxiety, and anxiety becomes the disavowed foundation of precarious trust and performative friendship between neighbours.

In Chapter 10 of the book, Magnus Fiskesjö steps away from an anthropocentric framing of neighbouring relations. Fiskesjö takes the notion of neighbouring to explore human-animal relations and deeply rooted sino-centric hierarchies. He argues that, in a certain sense, animal neighbours are seen as an extension of the barbarian periphery, a link in a hierarchical chain-of-being-like conception of the world. But this clearly antagonistic dispositive (the history of a thousand-year war, as Fiskesjö puts it) has become complicated by China's nascent animal rights movement, which emphasizes universal moralities in the fight against enslavement and the selfish extermination of human's animal neighbours.

The unifying themes in the four chapters in this final section are the spectres of unsettled relations and uncertain outcomes. Agonistic relations suggest that in order to achieve common interest, potential antagonisms between neighbours are always held in check, and friendships have to be consciously maintained and performed. Agonistic intimacies at China's borderworlds reconfigure contemporary relation politics, as communities and polities move towards a future of promises and uncertainties.

While this book does not attempt to formulate a general theory of neighbouring, it is a first step in laying the ground for an anthropology of neighbouring. The focus of this book – the shared experiences of neighbouring along and across China's borders, proximity as a matter of orientation and intimacy, and agonistic intimacy that fosters fragile futures – helps

envision the possible contours of such an anthropology. Furthermore, we hope that the ten reflections of neighbouring situations in the border-worlds at China's edge render visible a geographical configuration of great geopolitical importance. The borderworlds at stake, which sporadically make headlines as spaces of disorder but usually remain buried under the 'neat graphics of national order', as Ludden puts it (2003: 1058), reveal their positionality only in comparison. We hope that this book as a whole will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics that transform both the very local scale of neighbouring as well as Asia as a whole.