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Where **CHINA** Meets
SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Where **CHINA** Meets
SOUTHEAST ASIA

Social & Cultural Change
in the Border Regions

edited by

Grant Evans
Christopher Hutton
Kuah Khun Eng

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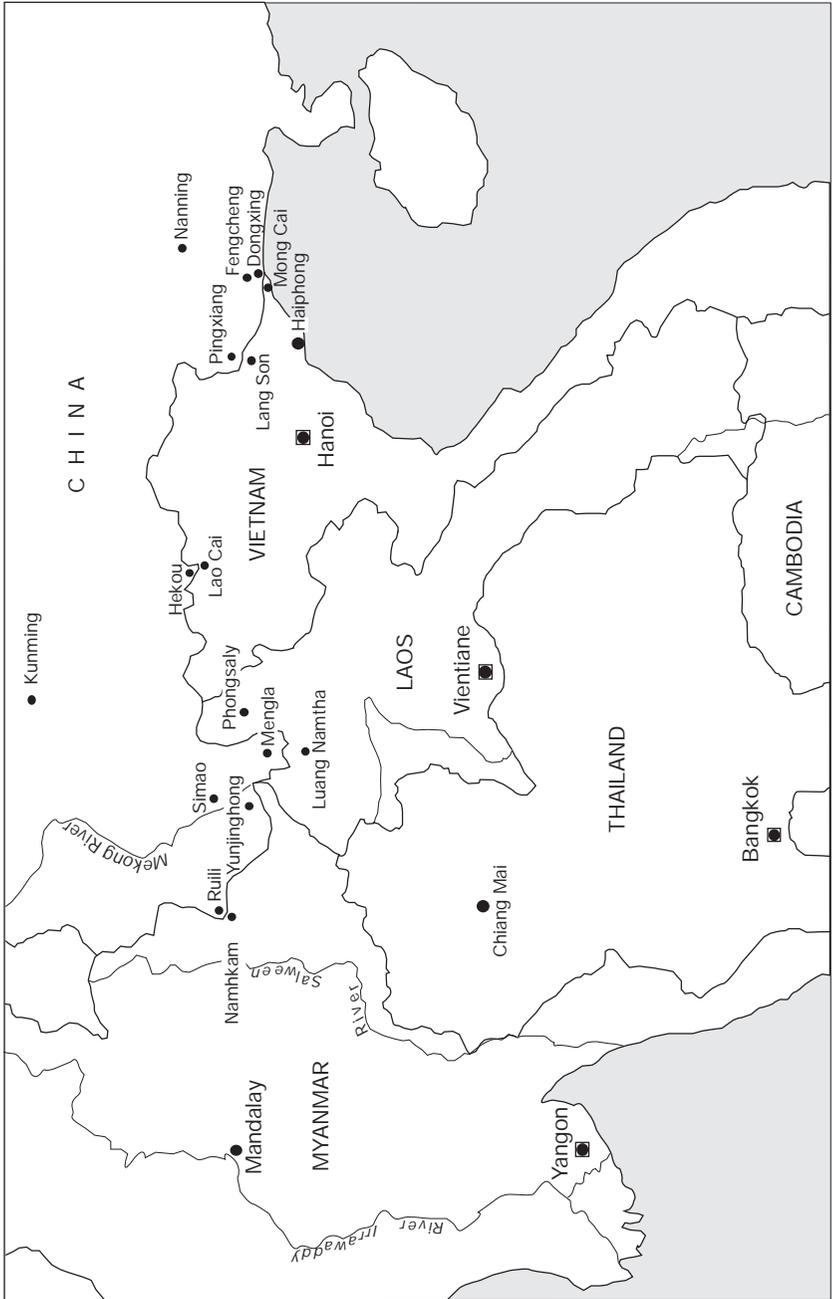
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Figure 1
Cross-Cultural Interaction between Southern China and Mainland Southeast Asia



Introduction: The Disappearing Frontier?

The Editors

The chapters for this book were all written in headier days — not too long ago — when the “Asian Economic Miracle” was still riding high. When words like “free-wheeling” and “dynamic” were bandied about freely, conveying a sense of limitless investment opportunities and a new age of growth which would soon overflow into general affluence, and further down the line, human rights and democratic freedoms.

But even then people knew that there was an underside to the Asian dream: official corruption, environmental havoc, the exploitation of marginal or vulnerable social groups (migrant workers, rural women, children, ethnic minorities), the appropriation of land, the spread of drug abuse, prostitution. This was a vision of capitalist greed backed by state controls, a nightmare world in which the worst of capitalism meets the worst of Stalinism, where workers locked in at work die in factory fires, border guards are drug smugglers and forestry officials are loggers and poachers.

The Asian economic crisis that began with the collapse of the Thai baht in mid-1997, along with the pall of haze which hung across South-east Asia as a result of the enormously destructive forest fires in Indonesia, swung attention to the downside of the seemingly fast-fading miracle. International commentators now focus on the effects of corruption and cronyism in government across the region, and there is an embarrassed silence about the earlier upbeat assessments.

The chapters in this volume, all written during the final heydays of the “Tiger Economies”, are neither enthralled by the “miracle”, nor do they simply focus on its downside. Instead, they all convey a rare understanding of the complexity of the changes engulfing the region. Indeed, the chapter by Hinton, “Where Nothing Is as It Seems”, is not only a careful critique of many of the conceptualizations of the changes in the region. It is also a statement about how difficult it is to conceptualize such diverse changes, and diverse capitalisms (rather than some fictitious, singular “Asian capitalism”), and he warns us about how easy it is to be smug in retrospect.

This tendency to see complexity where others see simple visions is a hallmark of social science, and most of the authors are either anthropologists, linguists, or sociologists, with a historian and ethno-botanist thrown in for good measure. They study and write about people rather than concentrating on economic statistics and aggregate figures, all of which may look wonderful from boardrooms and prime ministerial offices, but look much more problematic on the ground. Unlike political scientists who focus on political borders, or indeed economists who see these borders disappearing, the contributors in this book recognize that these political borders do not coincide with cultures — Vietnamese overlap into China and vice versa, Hmong, Akha, Yao Lue, and so on all overlap the borders of the region, just as languages flow back and forth across them (see the chapter by Hutton). At a cultural and social level the frontiers have been borderless for a long time.

The reports from the field, from the borderlands between China and mainland Southeast Asia, contained in this book provide readers with the first survey of social conditions since the opening of the borders there in the early 1990s. That is, following radical changes in the economic policies of the various states involved, in particular, China, Vietnam, and Laos.¹ Most of the chapters provide a close-up survey of a particular area and problem, but cumulatively they provide an invaluable general picture of social and cultural change in the border regions *Where China Meets Southeast Asia*.

Commentators who have focused exclusively on economics (and readers will note that economists are not represented in this collection at all) have been led to make extravagant claims like those of Kenichi Ohmae:

Public debate may still be hostage to the outdated vocabulary of political borders, but the daily realities facing most people in the developed and developing worlds — both as citizens and as consumers — speak a vastly

different idiom. Theirs is the language of an increasingly borderless economy, true global market-place. But the references we have — the maps and guides — to this new terrain are still largely drawn in political terms.²

While it would be foolish to deny the tremendous power of the global market-place in the late twentieth century, the economy is always embedded in social, cultural, and political structures, as many of the chapters in this book demonstrate. But what is also clear is that economic change along the border has meant a closing of the frontier there. Unlike clearly demarcated borders, frontiers can be regions that are sparsely settled, or fall at the margins of the market economy and central regulation. The closing of the frontier entails incorporation into the mainstream of national life, into the national and international markets, and a concerted attempt by the state to turn the frontier into a clearly marked and regulated border. The increasing flow of goods, capital, people, and animals across the borders has called for closer state monitoring of these flows in the form of decisions about visas, taxation, banned substances or endangered species, and so on.

Not too long ago, for example, the border between Laos and southern Yunnan was completely closed, then only closed to foreigners. When in 1993 the government in Vientiane relaxed its rules and Grant Evans crossed from the province of Luang Namtha into Xishuangbanna in southern Yunnan, there were few other foreigners to be seen. But within a year the backpacker network and the local tourists industries were demanding that the Lao government facilitate easier travel in the region. Now, tourists along with traders flow through the region with ease, but not without regulation. Previously, border guards did not have to even think about these problems; now they do — just as governments now have to pay attention to the economic and cultural consequences of this mobility. Borders may become porous, but that does not make them borderless. They were only borderless in the past when Akha or Muslim caravaners, or other ethnic groups in the region wandered across it without paying attention to borders drawn up in far-off capitals. But those days are gone.

Three of the countries represented in the chapters in this book — China, Vietnam, and Laos — are still ruled by communist parties. Previously relatively autarkic and closed, they have all since the mid-1980s gradually opened themselves up to the world outside and carried through radical economic reforms. These communist states, whilst highly interventionist in economic planning, cultural and social policy, and restric-

tive of population movements, paradoxically left many regions and human and natural ecosystems relatively undisturbed. Social upheavals such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in China and the periodic migrations and conflicts in the history of post-war Vietnam did have dramatic effects on human culture and the natural environment. However, in many respects these communist states lacked the resources and the will to assert full and continual control over border and mountain regions and the peoples who live there. The implementation of market reforms in post-Mao China and the collapse of the Soviet Union largely signalled the end of state monopoly control over the economy in Asian states (North Korea being the obvious exception). The opening up of these economies to market forces, the rise of a consumer culture with its demand for higher-quality domestic and imported foreign goods, the loosening of internal migration controls, the rise of tourism, and so on, have created a cycle of rising demand requiring ever-increasing supply. Development means construction (offices, roads, hotels, ports); construction requires raw materials; and raw materials transported in larger quantities require better infrastructure. Economic development demands migrant labour; it also creates a new upper middle class (made up in part of the old state élite) with money to spend and to invest.

This process creates pressures on land, not only in the core areas of development (Shanghai or Ho Chi Minh City), but also in the peripheries where timber and other raw materials are obtainable, and where possibilities for tourism exist (regional or international). The traffic in drugs and in migrant prostitutes expands with an increasingly mobile labouring population and with a rise in the circulation of commodities of all kinds. We see local cross-border trading networks co-opted and integrated into the wider economy. Long-standing relationships may be subverted or transformed; women traders may take up key positions in the micro-economy with important consequences for their social standing (see the chapter by Xie); party officials may become entrepreneurs; police and customs officials may transform their enhanced regulatory roles into profit-making ones; cross-border contacts may be renewed and remade; and ethnic loyalties reassessed and re-evaluated as trading networks are established with wider links into the regional and national economy (see the chapters by Chau, Toyota, Berlie, and Cheung).

While border regions between power centres have for obvious reasons always been sites of conflict, modern states (both colonial and post-colonial) have different notions of borders and sovereignty. For them,

sovereignty is an all-or-nothing concept; the border is defined not as a sphere of influence or suzerainty, but in exact geographical detail. Economic development requires infrastructural development and “isolated” regions are thus incorporated willy-nilly into the larger national context. Migrations from lowlands to uplands accelerate. The state as it were begins to expand right up to its own borders; opening the border creates new opportunities for state intervention at the border and expands the regulatory power of official state agencies (see the chapter by Walker).

This process, however, does not imply necessarily the levelling out of all ethnic diversity and the beginnings of total assimilation (for example, of minorities into the Han Chinese or Vietnamese Kinh mainstream). Some ethnic groups see their identity strengthened as their cross-border kinship networks become powerful economic instruments; other groups are reinvented or reinvent themselves as tourist attractions and icons for the region’s “culture” (ethnic food, dance, the exotic); groups with limited official representation and without a strong power base may lose their access to land or hunting terrain and find themselves in competition with a new migrant semi-urban poor; some identities become “irrelevant” or are lost by migration and assimilation. This is not a simple process to evaluate or to judge ethically. To be “ethnic” often means to be poor, and most people do not want to be poor. All ethnic groups are the products of assimilation and migration and of complex processes of identity construction. In a market economy the process of change is accelerated, and those groups who cannot barter their ethnicity in the new economy must seek other means to survive in competition with cheap migrant labour (see the chapter by Evans).

Our purpose in putting together this book was to go beyond the all too abundant clichés about the region and look in detail at social and cultural changes in this crucial border region following the demise of rigid central planning in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and its Southeast Asian confrères. Researchers with different academic backgrounds and nationalities brought their expertise and knowledge of particular regions and languages to bear on the complex developments that have been taking place along the Chinese border with mainland Southeast Asia over the last decade.³ The chapters provide both more general perspectives on the history and recent development in the region and studies based on particular areas and problems. Wade offers a historical perspective on the southern borders of China; Michaud and Culas give an overview of recent migrations of the Hmong. Feingold looks at the

links between the opium trade and trafficking in women (the subject of women and prostitution is also treated by Xie); Kuah gives an overview of official PRC policy towards border trade in the region. Other chapters concentrate in particular on two geographical areas: the first is the western end of the border region, where the links between Yunnan province in China and Laos and Myanmar are analysed (Berlie, Cohen, Evans, Toyota, Walker); the second area of particular focus is the eastern Guangxi-Vietnam border in the area around Dongxing/Mong Cai (see the chapters by Chau, Cheung, Hutton, and Xie).

Of course, the volume by its very nature cannot claim to be exhaustive. There are many more topics and many more locales that could be studied in depth, and we hope that the research represented here will stimulate further fieldwork in the border regions. But we do claim that these chapters provide information and insights that are unobtainable elsewhere, and that they also provide a healthy corrective to the avalanche of economic studies done on the region. After the deluge, we hope that economists and policy-makers will turn to these pages to gain a more complex and subtle understanding of social and cultural changes in the interstices of *Where China Meets Southeast Asia*.

NOTES

1. There has been, however, a survey of "Ethnic Minorities on the Borderlands of Southwest China", a Special Issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 38, no. 2 (1997), edited by John McKinnon.
2. Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State: The Rise of Regional Economies* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 8.
3. This volume brings together papers first presented at a conference held in the University of Hong Kong from 4 to 6 December 1996. The conference entitled "South China and Mainland Southeast Asia: Cross-Border Relations in the Post-Socialist Age" offered a forum where, for example, scholars from Laos, Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China could meet and exchange ideas. The conference was supported by a project funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council, awarded to Evans, Hutton, and Kuah, and was organized in co-operation with the Centre for Asian Studies at the University of Hong Kong.