

speaking, and the relationship between individual “consciousness” and collective action is, at best, very complex. The most interesting and valuable source material in the book is the author’s own interviews with workers, but the majority of the sources are written, either from workers’ letters and petitions or, more often, from journalistic or official reports, and in these cases interpretation is very difficult. The author generally uses key words to trigger an interpretation, but the fact that workers, let alone their spokesperson (most probably a “barrack room lawyer”), journalists or government officials, might use a particular phrase in articulating grievances and demands cannot really tell us anything about the “consciousness” or motivation of the workers in question. The phrasing of demands is more likely a tactical judgement than a spontaneous expression of “consciousness”.

The book’s level of detail means that it provides fascinating source material for those seeking to develop comparative studies of worker protests in the face of globalization. The overwhelming impression from its accounts is that Vietnamese workers have mobilized, ever since the French occupation, on a class basis and that their mobilization has generally overcome divisions of skill, local origin, gender, ethnicity and religion. At the same time, as might be expected, their demands have rarely been phrased in the language of pure class struggle, but have appealed to the law, the state, religion and morality in support of the workers’ demands.

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Vietnamese-Chinese Relationships at the Borderlands: Trade, Tourism and Cultural Politics. By Yuk Wah Chan. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013. 148 pp.

This book examines the everyday cross-border interaction of the communities in the border towns of Hekou in China and Lao Cai

in Vietnam. It assesses the local experiences of the people who take part in cross-border activities, namely trade, tourism, social networking, and marriages between spouses from opposite sides of the border. The book is the outcome of continuous observation and research in the China-Vietnam borderlands since 2002.

The underlying message of the book is that Chinese-Vietnamese interactions at the borderlands are variegated, complex, and dynamic. Supporting its argument with ethnographically rich data and analysis, the book unpacks local experiences of cross-border interactions and interstate relations as it focuses on ground-level diplomacy, historical relations, cultural prejudices, and the effects of changing state policies at the borderlands. Its bottom-up perspective is markedly different from the state-level perspectives common in the academic fields of international relations and political science. Those latter perspectives treat cross-border and interstate interactions in static and absolute terms. The book also deconstructs state-imposed logics by delving into the social and economic processes through which Chinese and Vietnamese people actually interact.

Throughout the book, a distinct qualitative approach is evident as the author provides a compelling account of the on-the-ground practices of cross-border interactions, as well as of the reality of regulation at the Hekou-Lao Cai border. In addition, the book is sensitive to the historical relationship between China and Vietnam, arguing that China-Vietnam ties have been underlined by animosity and friendliness at different periods throughout history. Chapter Four illustrates the age-old stereotypes that the Chinese and the Vietnamese have held of each other by examining the interactions between Chinese tourists and their Vietnamese hosts at the borderlands. The chapter also shows that the Vietnamese hosts generally welcome tourists from China for economic reasons, but dislike rude and culturally insensitive Chinese tourists. Despite their seemingly weak position, the Vietnamese are still able to manage the situation by “silencing” (p. 81) the tension between China and Vietnam, such as that stemming from the short but devastating 1979 military conflict between them, and highlighting the cultural similarities and historical intimacy of the two countries instead. More crucially, it argues

that some Vietnamese tourism workers have shown sophistication after acquiring experience and better Chinese language skills, in negotiating the asymmetrical and sensitive Chinese-Vietnamese relationship by telling jokes to appease the Chinese tourists and to keep their arrogance at bay and thus turning potentially inimical ties into amiable ones (p. 84).

In addition to providing a historically sensitive bottom-up narrative, the book contributes to the abundant literature on *guanxi* (relationships). In Chapter Three, it rightly observes that there has been insufficient discussion of the side effects of patron-client *guanxi* between the state and the business sector, and of how such *guanxi* may invite official extortion and develop into a ritual of money giving. While conventional literature chiefly stresses the cooperative and symbiotic relationship between the state and the business sector, it has often overlooked the unwanted demands advanced by state agents that the business sector would like to avoid. To this end, the chapter enriches the literature on this “economy of familiarity” (p. 17) by highlighting the predatory behaviour of some state agents and the unhappiness of business owners with the lopsided nature of the system in which they find themselves entrenched. It thus succeeds in revealing the rough dimensions of the patron-client relations at the borderlands.

Despite its various merits, the book does not cover enough ground. For example, Chapter Four studies tourism from the perspective of a Vietnamese host to visiting Chinese tourists. Although Chinese outbound tourism to Lao Cai is a significant revenue-generator for the Vietnamese border town, it must be stressed that a large number of Vietnamese tourists visit Hekou, too. Yet this angle is not covered, causing one to wonder whether the book has sacrificed breadth of coverage for depth of analysis. The text could also be better copy-edited, as some terms were consistently misspelled. It is also missing a map.

In summary, *Vietnamese-Chinese Relationships at the Borderlands* is insightful, as it offers an alternative and vivid point of view on a subject that has long been dominated by studies of power and of the discourses of the state. The book is also noteworthy for its

success in unravelling a difficult topic by focusing on the local experiences and micro-strategies of the people of the borderlands. Notwithstanding some of its shortcomings, the book will lend itself well to undergraduate or graduate courses in Asian studies, anthropology, border studies, and social and cultural studies.

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Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore. By Loh Kah Seng. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013. xxvii+315 pp.

The book's unequivocal title hides a complex study of a significant moment in Singapore's past. *Squatters into Citizens* argues that the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire was a catalyst for Singapore's emergence as a modern state, as squatters rendered homeless by the fire were rehoused in clean, orderly — modern — apartment flats. But the book offers more than an argument for the historical significance of the fire; it also attempts to connect a local event to broader histories of fire, housing, and responses to post-war crises. As such, the book contains several underlying sub-narratives. The story of the fire is complemented by a historical-cum-sociological study of the locale known as Kampong Bukit Ho Swee. It also includes an extensive social history of former kampong-dwellers, an analysis of their post-fire lives and their memories of the event. The book is further layered with an informative account of government and societal responses to threats — real and perceived — posed by disorganized housing, rehousing efforts and fire.

A common factor tying these narratives together is the author's desire to counter the Singapore Story. Despite its generic name, the Singapore Story is generally perceived as the state's version of Singapore history, one which is in turn unavoidably centred on