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## Review

Xiangming Chen. *As Borders Bend: Transnational Spaces on the Pacific Rim*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. 333 pp., maps, illustrations, index.

Reviewed by George C. S. Lin<sup>1</sup>

For a long while, the standard interpretation portrayed a “borderless world” in which the powerful forces of globalization effectively removed territorial barriers and undermined the capacity of nation-states. On September 11, 2001, serious questions occurred concerning territorial borders in the light of the new global wave of re-bordering subsequent to terrorism. Increasingly, territorial borders and border regions are understood as flexible political and geographic devices that look inwards and outwards, separate and interact, unify and divide, and include and exclude. Moreover, the previous perceived notion of a “borderless world” has been replaced by a more careful, contextually sensitive, and historically contingent point of view in which “de-bordering” and “re-bordering” are seen as two sides of the same coin. While the re-conceptualization of territorial borders and border regions in the post-September 11 era has attracted great attention from both academics and policymakers, many theoretical and practical issues remain ambiguous partly because of the rapidity of change in time and partly because of the great variety of situations in different world regions. Against this backdrop, the book under review here stands out as a valuable and timely contribution to the burgeoning literature on border studies and transnationalism in general and border regions in the Asia-Pacific in particular.

The purpose of the book is to give a comparative documentation of a number of transborder subregions in the Asia-Pacific context and beyond, make comparative sense of the varied economic, political, and sociocultural links among these places within the different transborder subregional contexts, and place various local units of the transborder subregions in the layered spaces of transnational and intra-regional flows for understanding how the units and flows are mediated by national and subnational policies and practices. This is accomplished by a detailed comparative study of seven cases including three border regions in East Asia and four across Southeast Asia. Comparison is also made between border regions from the Asia-Pacific and Atlantic. The comparative study of such a diverse set of cases of territorial borders and border regions in different regional contexts is bounded by a common theoretical argument: “borders are shedding their traditional barrier effects and are playing a more bridging role in the Asia-Pacific area and elsewhere, although this role does lapse back under changed circumstances” (page 13). “De-bordering” and “re-bordering” are seen as intertwined, and the shift from barrier to bridge is understood as a long historical trend, whereas the reaction of nation-states to terrorism is a temporary reversal (page 14).

More specifically, the book introduces an innovative theoretical framework to account for the diversity among several transborder subregions in the Asia-Pacific context and elsewhere. This framework includes the four analytical lenses that are drawn from different sets

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Geography, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong.

of literature: namely an economic lens (the global-local nexus) drawn from the globalization literature; a political lens looking at the reconfiguration of state functioning; a social lens focusing on historical legacies, ethnic identity, kinship ties, and linguistic similarity; and a spatial lens concerning geographic proximity. The book contributes not only important theoretical insights to the existing literature but also new and updated knowledge about the actual processes of transnationalism in the Asia-Pacific region in the globalizing era.

In the current intellectual context in which local particularity, place sensitivity, and historical contingency are taken very carefully and seriously, any attempt to engage in comparative studies must be an extremely difficult, challenging, and risky venture. Chen takes on this challenge exceedingly well. Obviously, the innovative approach adopted and demonstrated in the book is the result of years-long research including on-the-spot field investigations from which insightful information was obtained first-hand. The book fills a noticeable gap in the extant literature by offering an informative, comprehensive, comparative, and up-to-date account of the practices of “de-bordering” and “re-bordering” in the key border regions of the Asia-Pacific in a global perspective. Chen aptly and eloquently articulates a story of transborder dynamics in the Asia-Pacific that has never been systematically told.

This well-conceived and -organized volume includes nine chapters grouped into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1 to 3) situates transborder dynamics in the Asia-Pacific against the broader background of globalization and transnationalism. In an attempt to make sense of what has been observed in the Asia-Pacific, the author takes stock of the existing theoretical literature and introduces a conceptual framework. Attention is then turned to the real world and actual cases in the three East Asian regions that border with China, namely the greater southeast China region, the Bohai/Yellow Sea region, and the greater Tumen border region (Part II). Part III extends the case study into Southeast Asia where four border regions are scrutinized, including the greater Mekong border region, the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle, the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle, and the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area. The Asian cases are then compared and contrasted with their Atlantic counterparts (Chapter 8). The book concludes with a discussion of the implications of this comparative study for theoretical understanding and policymaking (Chapter 9).

Logically coherent and interconnected, all of the chapters are very well written and illustrated with information analyzed and presented in tabular, graphic, and cartographic forms. I particularly like the way in which endnotes, references, and appendices are organized. All graphics and maps are presented in high quality. The attempt at a comparative study between the Asia-Pacific and Atlantic (Europe and North America) in Chapter 8 appears to be an ambitious task that cannot simply be accomplished in a few pages. However, given the complex nature of the subject matter and the focus of the book, any suggestion for an alternative must necessarily be something easier said than done.

Overall, this book makes a landmark contribution to the study of transborder dynamics in the Asia-Pacific in the era of globalization. In a bold and ground-breaking move, Chen brings together cases of “de-bordering” and “re-bordering” for integrated and innovative documentation and explanation. Until recently, the literature of border studies has suffered from a lack of comparative, balanced, and integrated accounts of actual practices in different geopolitical contexts. This book is among the first to venture into this important yet challenging line of enquiry. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in globalization, transnationalism, border studies, international relations, political geography, development studies, and, of course, anthropology and sociology.