

## Botakoz Kassymbekova

**Steven Parham. *China's Borderlands: The Faultline of Central Asia*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017. 304 pp. ISBN 978-1-78453-506-3.**

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The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the redrawing of the Eurasian map. Steven Parham takes an ethnographic look at what this remapping meant for the people who populate the southern border regions between Kyrgyzstan (Naryn), Tajikistan (Pamir), and eastern China (Xinjiang). Parham analyzes how people in these regions understood and dealt with the transition from a Soviet to post-Soviet border regime in their everyday life. Aiming to scale down from a top-down state view of political geography and change, Parham asks, “which social forces originate in borderlands and how they constitute sociopolitical life locally, nationally, and beyond the territorial limits of the state.” In other words, the author explains, “we need to understand how the border is lived” (p. 31). For the newly independent republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, he shows, this meant not only learning what to do with new international borders that were previously managed by the distant center in Moscow but also understanding what constitutes the “state” and “nation” and how to deal with an absent or too intrusive state that claims territory but not borderlanders’ well-being. Parham is also interested in discerning moments of change by learning what those borders meant for people’s and states’ past, present, and future: were they a source of danger, new opportunities, ethnic nationalism, or global connections? Parham argues that borders are actively made, narrated, lived, and identified with—both by the state and the people who populate their margins. The kinds of tensions that develop between those who consider it their home and those who consider it their job is one of the primary focuses of the book.

One of the primary findings, which is supported across chapters, is that people who live on the border—Parham names them borderlanders—often actively adopt and integrate top-down state vocabulary and practices, even if it contradicts ethnographic understandings of brotherhood. Thus, for example, the state border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that divides ethnic Kyrgyz is treated by the state and the population as an international border between sovereign states. Instead of considering a Soviet misunderstanding or top-down bureaucratic act, ethnic Kyrgyz border guards and Tajikistani citizens actually use the border to discuss ethnic authenticity rather than simply ignore the border between ethnic “brothers.”

To understand how borderlanders learned to see the border, Parham provides a historical overview of how the border was made and contrasts this with how people today remember (or imagine) the process of living the border in the past. One of the reasons borderlanders learned to associate with the political and social life of the

border, in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Parham argues, is that the Soviet state actively integrated the local population into the borderland regime. Soviet leaders thought that the integration of locals into the border economy and infrastructure—by constructing hospitals, theaters, schools, and collective farms—guaranteed their loyalty to the state. Borderlanders remember receiving higher salaries and better provisions during Soviet times, and they learned to associate their well-being with the border. The border, then, was central to their sense of citizenship.

While during Soviet times it was the international borders with China and Afghanistan that were guarded, in the post-Soviet era it is also new borders between ex-Soviet republics that have to be narrated, understood, and integrated into borderlanders' lives. Moreover, borderlanders have to deal with an opening of the previously shut international border with China. How do they deal with these changes?

Parham argues that "borderlanders are not passive receptacles of central state policy" (p. 83) and that local power dynamics explain why they accept the state's vision of territoriality and peripherality, even if it contradicts ethnonational notions of sovereignty. Yet, any interesting development of local dynamics will be affected by external factors. While in post-Soviet states central governments have fewer financial and administrative resources to control their borders, local border "elites" have more power to negotiate and manipulate what is being smuggled and how the movement of people and goods takes place. But the power of the borderlanders and their elites that resulted from post-Soviet state weakness is not a source of pride, but rather a burden. Borderlanders, in a way, co-construct the state's sovereignty. While they do so, on the other hand, rather than desiring a share of decision-making powers, they desire the security of a central state that makes decisions and also provides for the borderlanders. Borderlanders, one can infer, want not only to profit from the border financially but also to see it as a source of identity and an honorable future. It is also important for borderlanders to see themselves as citizens of a bigger nation that makes borders legitimate and meaningful in the first place.

The border, many post-Soviet borderlanders claimed, had been an honorable place, space, and context to live in the Soviet period. While post-Soviet developments saw the peripheralization of the borderlands, the Chinese state started to invest in border regions. As a result Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh Chinese are, more often than not, opting for Chinese nationalism because, as one Kyrgyz from Xinjiang mentioned, "we gain [with the Chinese state] more than we lose" (p. 125). Just as with the Soviet state before, the Chinese state finally arrived in people's minds and hearts due to the infrastructural development, opportunities for social mobility, and a meaningful national narrative. It is at the margins, both territorial and national, that Parham shows how states succeed or fail to perform as "legitimate masters of their citizens' loyalties" (p. 27). The process, as the book successfully shows, is not straightforward and is contingent on various factors, both external and local. Parham's book takes readers to distant, rarely crossed, territories and imaginatively retells and explains stories told on roads and buses, in houses, and at border controls. However, his ethnographic approach is based upon conversations about borders, not direct observations of people's lives. Regrettably, the readers do not know how much

time the author spent in the region and what he did there. Since the author provides only glimpses of the border-crossing experience and opinions about borders from some interlocutors, the study does not include analysis based on nonverbal behavior—job changes, family decisions, government events—which would lend the analysis depth as an ethnographic project. It does not investigate the important contradictions between what people say and what people do, nor does it capture moments of change or uncertainty. This is why the style and observations seem to be of a journalistic, rather than ethnographic, nature. Nevertheless, it is a useful contribution to understanding the region's transformation. Although the book contributes to the growing literature on borders in the post-Soviet region such as Mathijs Pelkmans's *Defending the Border* (2006) or Madeleine Reeves's *Border Work* (2014), it confirms earlier findings that the border is a work-in-progress and that borders can be sources of identity rather than providing novel theoretical insights.

Parham's book would benefit from a more systematic historical discussion. The author's ambition to provide a complex historical context, taking him to the distant past of the region, could be useful, but is often quite misleading. Since his aim is to look at borderlanders' experiences and relationship to the state, he uses their biographies not as perceptions of the past, but often quite literally takes them for the past itself. As a result, the difference between memory and history is not discussed and they are presented interchangeably. Moreover, and this is one of the most regrettable omissions, the author mostly forgot to date his conversations with interlocutors. Since he spent an admirable decade studying the border, it is difficult to decipher from the text whether a conversation took place in the early or late 2000s. This is a significant omission considering the rapid development that took place in the region, which the author himself mentions, during the decade. Last but not least, a better structured book would allow for a more fluent reading. Historical contexts are provided in every chapter, often not in chronological order, so that the reader takes trips between epochs and regions all too often, confusing the aim of the book: an "objective" historical investigation of the region or an ethnographic examination of subjective perceptions of change within it.

## REFERENCES

- Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2006. *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
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