

## **"On Edge: China's Frontiers in a Time of Change"**

12-14 October 2017, Kandersteg, Switzerland

### **Conference abstract:**

Global literatures on frontiers and borders have tended to cast such spaces as peripheral, framing them within the geopolitical logics of the nation-state and identifying them as zones of crisis, exploitation, and dispossession (Brunet-Jailly 2005; Newman 2003). Borderlands have long been spaces of geopolitical turbulence in China, too. A growing literature is seeking to probe ways to shift discussions of borderlands and frontiers beyond such conventional, state-centric framing and to examine the manifold ways that societies manipulate and interact with dimensions of their ostensible marginality. The aim of this conference is to advance this discussion by proposing new ways of discussing relationships within and across Chinese border regions in order to shed light on surprising connections, unconventional alliances and complex intertwinements that render China's borderlands a porous and multilayered space of interaction and connection, rather than merely "marginal" or "peripheral" in any simple state-defined sense. Through participants' different research endeavors, this workshop's will shed new light on counter-intuitive linkages among regions located "on the edge" of variously constructed political, economic, and cultural spaces and will also assess how such spaces intersect with so-called "core" regions of China. In so doing, this workshop proposes to advance efforts aimed at rephrasing these relationships to account for new kinds of flows in borderlands, emerging assertions of regional identity, and renewed geopolitical designs cast by multiple actors upon China's Inner Asian borderlands.

We encourage authors to disrupt the notion of the borderland or frontier as a pre-determined region and to consider the relationality of such spaces as a multi-dimensional production with inputs from local and non-local actors, wide-ranging cultural and political forces, uneven financial flows, and mutually reinforcing social and physical landscapes. We discern, in the context of China's borderlands, both a need and an opportunity to push existing theorizations of the relationships between place, capital, material practices and subjectivities established by such scholars as Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1989) and Doreen Massey (1994). These conceptualizations turn out difficult to meaningfully apply in China's frontier regions where national security, management of border populations, and surveillance regimes have all nested in relations that are not readily reduced to the logics of capitalist space production. Accordingly, we find it necessary to expand the existing debates on borderlands by reflecting on them *through* the lens of China's "border situation," its complex histories, its materialities, and its subjectivities.

The temporal frame of the conference has been roughly set on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with most papers likely focusing on the period between the 1940s and today.

**Conveners:** Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Bern and Fribourg), Max Woodworth (Ohio State University), Madlen Kobi (Università della Svizzera Italiana)

**Discussant:** Prof. Li Zhang (Department of Anthropology, UC Davis)

## Conference program

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### 12 October 2017, Thursday

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5:30 pm Conference registration and welcome drinks  
Hotel Alfa Soleil, Kandersteg

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7 pm Dinner

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### 13 October 2013, Friday

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8.45-9.15 Opening words  
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern and Human Geography Unit, Fribourg University

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9.15-11.15 Panel 1:  
Karin Dean, School of Humanities, Tallinn University  
Title: Assembling the Sino-Myanmar borderlands  
  
Alessandro Rippa, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, LMU Munich  
Title: Illicit passages (*tongdao*): a tale of three border crossings

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11.15-11.30 Coffee and snacks break

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11.30-12.30 Panel 2:  
Travis Klingberg, Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich  
Title: Geographies of the geo-body: on the birth, pathology, and regeneration of Chinese territoriality

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12.30-13.30 Lunch break

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13.30-15.00 "Discussion in motion": Time for informal discussion while hiking in Oeschiwald

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15.00-17.00 Panel 3:  
Sun Xiaoping, Department of History, Saint Mary's University, Halifax  
Title: Socialist Space Production in China's Northeastern Borderland

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Tom White, Social Anthropology Division, Cambridge University  
Title: Cosmopolitan camels and the geographies of the New Silk Road

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17.00-17.20 Coffee and snacks break

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17.20-18.20 Panel 4:  
Madlen Kobi, Institute of Architecture, Università della Svizzera Italiana  
Title: Socio-Material Practices Around Climate: A Thermal Perspective on  
Architecture in Ürümqi, Xinjiang

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18.20-18.30 Wrap-up of the day

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19.00 Dinner

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### **14 October 2013, Saturday**

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9.00-11.00 Panel 5:  
Emilia Sulek, Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies,  
Zurich University  
Title: From the former frontier: What can we learn from the past which is  
long gone?

Judd Kinzley, Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Title: Seeing the Land, Unseeing the People: Natural Resources and the  
Making of Modern Xinjiang

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11.00-11.20 Coffee break

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11.20-12.20 Panel 6:  
Darren Byler, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington  
Title: Finding Space, Losing Space: Smart Phones, Transnational Islam  
and the Lives of Uyghur Men

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12.20-13.30 Lunch break

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13.30-14.30 Panel 7:  
Max Woodworth, Geography Department, Ohio State University  
Title: Spaces of the Gigantic: Extraction and Urbanization in Inner  
Mongolia

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15.00-18.00 "Discussion in motion"  
Brainstorming the ideas for the "Introduction" to the special issue while  
hiking to Oeschinensee

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18.00-18.30 Panel 8:  
Wrap-up of the brainstorming, discussion of submission deadlines,  
clarification of remaining questions  
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi and Max Woodworth

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19.00      Farewell dinner

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