

## INTRODUCTION

### **Guest Editor's Introduction to the Special Issue**

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The idea for this special issue emerged out of a conference on borders and civil society in East Asia jointly organized by Northeast Asian History Foundation, Thammasat University and Victoria University of Wellington. The conference was held at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University on November 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

This special issue constitutes one of the first academic attempts to explore the relationship between borders and civil society in Asia. The papers in this issue share the broad definition of civil society proposed by Charles Taylor in his 1990 article "Modes of Civil Society." Thus civil society is defined here as a web of autonomous associations of citizens that share a common concern, independent from the state but which can have an effect on public policy through their actions or just by their existence.

Most of the extant scholarship on civil society in Asia and beyond either focuses on domestic associations of citizens, or, alternatively, is driven by the "global civil society" paradigm introduced by Mary Kaldor in her *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (2003). The latter construes civil society as a global, territorially unbound network of different autonomous groups, bound together by certain norms and ideas. As such, the domestic focused scholarship on civil society construes states' borders as a natural boundary that delimitates their scope of inquiry, while the latter perceives borders as simply irrelevant.

Borders however can have important implications for the ways civil society groups operate and function. In its traditional definition, borders in International Relations refer to geographic boundaries of political entities, i.e. states. These

boundaries affect the structure of civil society groups, their ability to mobilize people and resources, as well as the scope of their activism. In cases of territorial disputes, borders can be the object of civic activism.

The importance of borders however becomes even more obvious if one follows the definition proposed by the inter-disciplinary field of Critical Border Studies. The latter defines borders as a set of practices. Namely, borders are not seen as static geographical boundaries but as a dynamic ensemble of socio-cultural practices that produce and reproduce the discursive boundaries between the “self” group and the “other” group, the “inside” and the “outside.” Borders defined as a set of practices have important implications for the study of civil society. Socio-cultural practices play an important role in the processes that shape social understanding of certain issues and their possible remedies. Thus it can be argued that borders play an important role in facilitating the emergence of certain civil society groups and precluding the emergence of other. Moreover, borders as practices are an integral part of the frames developed by civil society groups and utilized in their mobilization activities and efforts to influence policy.

Articles in this special issue focus on various instances of civic activism in Asia. They draw on both the traditional and the critical definitions of borders and explore the various roles these geographical boundaries and bordering practices played in their respective case studies.

The special issue consists of six articles. In the first article, Timur Dadabaev’s article explores the effects of border redrawing in post-Soviet Central Asia on local communities and their responses. Dadabaev shows the everyday life difficulties faced by communities that live along the recently created administrative boundaries which transformed a generally unimportant domestic boundary into an international border. The article also examines the role of ethnicity as a bordering practice in shaping the delimitation of inter-state borders and depicts the responses of local communities to the numerous difficulties created by these borders.

Alexander Horstmann and Decha Tangseefa focus on the Thai-Burmese borderland. Horstmann’s article explores the effect of the dichotomized bordering practice between the “good” Karen National Union (KNU) and the “evil” Burmese army, dominant among the Western NGOs, on the construction of Karen ethno-nationalism. It explores the blurred boundaries between civil society, social development and the cultural practices of international humanitarian organizations. It argues that Karen identity which construes not only the Burmese but also other minorities in Myanmar as its “other” was developed in tandem with the aid that poured into the area controlled by the KNU from overseas.

Tangseefa’s article focuses on Burmese migrant workers along the Thai-Burmese border. It explores the dual effects of this administrative boundary on the

Burmese that migrate into Thailand. On one hand, the porous nature of the border enables the Burmese to cross into the neighboring country in search for work. On the other hand, the lack of Thai citizenship and the subsequent illegal nature of their presence in Thailand create vulnerability and instability in their lives. Tangseefa's article also explores the multiple functions of the Mae Sot borderland. It shows that the role of the borderland is not predetermined or static. The area encompasses conflict but also accommodation, it also functions as the site for cultural translation and negotiation.

Ora-orn Poocharoen's article shifts the focus to Thailand's border with Malaysia and explores the intersection between civil society, insurgency and development in the South of Thailand. Based on extensive fieldwork in Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani provinces Poocharoen explores the challenges both insurgency and the central government's responses create for the local communities and their leaders. The article depicts the complex reality of these communities, which, to a large extent, is shaped by the bordering practices of the central government. The latter, the article shows, does not capture the complex reality in the South, but creates a rigid and dichotomous delimitation between pro-government and pro-insurgency communities. As Poocharoen shows this is very much a result of the language deployed by the authorities which depicts nationalists as separatists, citizens as villagers and divides all the local people along the pro-government/anti-government line.

Pichamon Yeophantong compares civic activism in Cambodia and Myanmar (Burma). Yeophantong examines local responses to Chinese backed resources development projects and analyzes the reasons for the stark difference in the ways civil societies in the two countries responded to similar challenges. The article argues that in the case of Myanmar network activists played a critical role in raising public awareness and attracting the external support necessary for spearheading a sustained campaign. At the same time, the article shows that the bordering practices of the international community played an important role in enhancing the capacity of the local activists. Namely, the placement of Myanmar within the realm of authoritarianism facilitated the framing of the protests against Chinese-led oil and gas pipelines projects as an integral part of the country's democratization and resulted in intensive international coverage of the issue and assistance from international NGOs.

Simon Avenell's article on the connection between environmental activism in Japan and in Southeast Asia in the 1970s concludes this special issue. Avenell explores the domestic factors in Japan that enabled the emergence of environmental activism as well as the reasons that spurred the interest in environmental issues in other East Asian countries among the Japanese activists. Avenell shows that

the discursively constructed borders between the local and the national as well as between the state and the people, played an important role in shaping the understanding of the widespread pollution and related problems among the Japanese activists. Their ability to cross geographical borders and to participate in various international events helped to create an understanding of pollution as a transnational issue. The Japanese Anti-Vietnam War movement that construed Japan as being an integral part of Asia, juxtaposed with the “West” helped to communicate instances of pollution by Japanese companies in Asia to domestic audience and by this contributed to shaping their agenda.

The articles in this special issue are quite diverse in terms of their geographical focus, methodology and arguments. They do not seek to offer any generalized conclusions regarding the relationship between borders and civil society in Asia but to suggest that this relationship is important and deserves further academic scrutiny.