


BOOK REVIEW

Asymmetrical Neighbors: Borderland State Building between China and Southeast Asia

By Enze Han. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 257 pp. £72.00 (cloth), £28.49 (paper)

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The 2021 military coup in Myanmar (Burma) has made understanding the politics of its borderlands more important than ever. After the junta abolished the civilian government and responded to peaceful resistance with brutal repression, armed resistance has spread across the country, from ethnic minority states with long histories of violent conflict to Burman-majority regions in the central parts of the country. This ongoing civilian resistance brought changes to the borderlands, as resistance fighters receive training from ethnic armed organizations, many seek refuge in Thailand, and both the Chinese and Thai governments deal with increasing levels of violence along their shared borders with Myanmar. Understanding the implications of these changes requires a deep understanding of how states historically developed and competed for control over societies in the region.

In *Asymmetrical Neighbors*, Enze Han approaches this important topic with a careful investigation into the politics of state and nation building processes in the borderlands of China, Myanmar, and Thailand. Employing a thorough comparative historical analysis, the book highlights an important yet understudied dynamic of state development while lending a deep historical perspective to current political situations in Myanmar's borders with China and Thailand. Moving beyond existing theories' focus on domestic factors, Han encourages readers to conceptualize state and nation building processes in the borderlands instead as an interactive process between individual states.

Starting with thought-provoking anecdotes from Han's fieldwork, the book's seven substantive chapters present key theoretical arguments and evaluate its ability to explain state and nation building in China, Myanmar, and Thailand's borderlands. Han conceptualizes the "neighborhood effect" as the extent to which "state building in one country can influence the state process in neighboring states" (p. 32) and lays out the argument in two parts (Chapter 2). First, power symmetry influences the neighborhood effect's strength. Under high asymmetry, the more powerful state has a greater impact on the state building of its weaker neighbor (either military

involvement or economic dominance). At the same time, the difference in effect sizes diminishes as power asymmetry declines. Second, the type of interstate relations shapes the type of involvement by the neighboring state. When relations are adversarial, the neighborhood effect is military in nature, while the focus shifts to economic development under amicable relations.

Han then traces the interactive state-building processes between the three countries, starting with the period before European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia to the post-independence era. Most of the analysis focuses on regions along the contemporary political boundaries of Myanmar's Kachin State (shared with China) and Shan State (shared with China and Thailand). Chapter 3 provides detailed historical descriptions of how the borderlands along Myanmar's Shan State engaged with numerous Burmese, Chinese, and Thai kingdoms. It then dives into the region's response to British colonial rule and Japanese occupation, ending with the Panglong Agreement of 1947. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the impact of the Chinese Civil War on state development in Myanmar and Thailand; the war and communist insurgency led to political fragmentation in Myanmar but helped consolidate state and nation building efforts in Thailand and China.

Analyzing the consequences of the neighbor effect, Chapter 6 looks at the implications of power asymmetries on transboundary economic flows. Here, Myanmar's relatively low development meant its borderlands were subject to economic dominance by Chinese and Thai neighbors and weakened market connections to the rest of the country. Chapter 7 is dedicated to the power asymmetries' consequences for nation building. Evident in its findings, Myanmar's ethnic minorities had a weaker attachment to the state and maintained contentious relations with the repressive military due to persistent state violence and the presence of better-treated kin groups in economically powerful neighbors.

An important innovation on the bellicist theories of state building, Han's work invites readers to be aware of power asymmetries and interstate relations as they shape state- and nation-building dynamics that defy political boundaries. There is noticeable potential to engage with work that focuses on the role of international factors in state development, such as Melissa Lee's *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State*, where foreign states strategically take advantage of the areas with weak state authority in their adversarial targets, further exacerbating the subversion by proxy groups. The book further engages with such works by explaining the significant variations in the extent and nature of international factors in state building.

Important questions for future research also arise from the book. One such question is when state- and nation-building processes experience what could be termed the "good neighbor effect." Han's argument focuses on the negative effects of power asymmetries and adversarial relations, such as economic dominance and political meddling, while suggesting a low neighbor effect when both are absent (p. 33). But this is where good neighbor effects can potentially appear as the states enhance each other's capacity and pursue more equitable economic development. Future research can further investigate this with other empirical cases, for instance, European states of the Schengen Area (with varying levels of power asymmetries) that Han describes as a representative case.

While the focus on the borders of Shan State and Kachin State allows for detailed analysis, it also leaves room for potential contrasting cases such as the Thailand–Malaysia border, where state–society relations remained violent, and nation-building posed significant challenges. Although Han deferred the case to other work (p. 185), this is an opportunity to observe whether power asymmetries and interstate relations could explain the history of political development in the region. It can also encourage richer theorizing of colonial rule’s impact, which Han acknowledges throughout the book but did not incorporate into the theoretical framework.

Regardless of such unanswered questions, the book still goes beyond providing scholars of state building with a useful theoretical framework that future research on state building can expand from; it will also satisfy those seeking to better understand the politics of Myanmar’s borderlands with a rich, historical perspective on the current political situations in the region.