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The Chinese Communists Find Religion:
The Struggle for the Selection of the Next Dalai Lama
Anne Thurston

Border Challenges in Asia
Special Edition

with an introduction by Sandra Fahy

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In today’s international system, we generally think of borders in the context of the Peace of Westphalia, the 1648 treaty which established our concept of sovereignty: borders are recognized political delineations of territory and governance. Indeed, conceptualizing borders as physical manifestations of governmental entities dominates our political discourse today. One only has to flip through the news and see President Donald Trump’s efforts to build a wall along the southern U.S. border or Russia’s military aggression in Ukraine to understand the importance of borders as political institutions. But borders are much more than lines on a map. Manlio Graziano, an Italian scholar of geopolitics, encapsulates this complicated concept by describing borders as a means, not an end, used to advance the interests of a group or people.\footnote{Manlio Graziano, \textit{What is a Border}? (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018): 3.} Borders can distinguish one group of people from another by establishing a definition of “insider” and “outsider,” while other borders dictate a state’s national narrative. Some borders are not even recognized by the international community and hold symbolic rather than political weight.

The Asia-Pacific presents a compelling set of border challenges and crises. One can find almost every form of border in the region—real and imagined, terrestrial and maritime, accessible and forbidden. Developed over years of conflict and evolving identities, the border issues harrying Asia are the result of a complex history of political, economic, and cultural histories.

Consider the Dokdo/Takeshima (\textit{Dokdo} in Korean, \textit{Takeshima} in Japanese) conflict, a maritime territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan that not only has political consequences—the controller of the islands enjoys the benefits of an extended maritime border and Exclusive Economic Zone—but also implications for the national narrative of both the Korean and Japanese peoples. Additionally, across the East China Sea is Taiwan, a nation whose borders are simultaneously not acknowledged by most of the international community, yet respected as sovereign by many. Does Taiwan fall within Chinese borders? Taiwan is an independent democracy, but international recognition of the PRC as the “one China” blurs the line across the Taiwan Strait. In Myanmar, the persecution of the Rohingya ethnic group presents a more human and urgent border crisis. Some Rohingya people are trapped within the borders of the Rakhine state enforced by the Burmese government, and others are displaced in surrounding countries. They live as outsiders despite within their own country—without legal citizenship and unrecognized as part of the Burmese ethnostate because of ethnic and religious divisions.

Why, then, does Asia have this exceptional set of border crises? What distinguishes borders in Asia from those in the rest of the world? These are the critical questions driving this Special Edition of the \textit{Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs}. In this issue, we explore specific border issues that illustrate the variety and complexity of this political institution in the region and consider both the implications of and solutions to associated problems.

\[1\] \textit{Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs}
The introduction to the Special Edition features perhaps the best-known and most heavily armed border in the region: the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between the two Koreas. Sandra Fahy addresses this border from a very personal angle, describing the courage and fortitude of the human spirit in conquering the militarized stretch of land that serves as a legacy of the Korean War. Through vignettes, she exposes the tribulations and opportunities presented by the DMZ, exploring the intersection of physical and cognitive borders.

In the first policy piece of this edition, Bill Hayton studies a security conflict in the South China Sea through a societal lens, examining the national narratives in Vietnam and China that drive these disputes. This piece reminds us that although maritime border disputes are well known for their security and military implications, they also hold social and political significance among the Vietnamese and Chinese peoples.

Deborah Milly follows with an analysis of border and immigration politics in Japan, a country whose land borders are buttressed by the sea. Japan currently faces an aging population crisis that could be alleviated to a degree by allowing more outsiders to immigrate to Japan on a permanent basis. However, Milly argues that the efforts of the Abe government to reform immigration are not substantial enough to provide a real solution to its population crisis. Japan's island geography and its government's willingness to protect its borders from outsiders has compounded an already troubling demographic dilemma.

Ian Baird contributes a story about clashes between different groups of Hmong people living along the border of Laos and Thailand. In this case, the clashes between the two Hmong groups were caused chiefly by their differing relationships to the border; some Hmong have accepted the Thai-Lao boundary as a legitimate political entity, while others have fought to change those borders and establish a new autonomous region. This political conflict made cooperation between them impossible, and despite shared ethnic identity, created enough mutual mistrust to incite violence.

In the final article of this Special Edition, Anne Thurston focuses on the formally unrecognized yet religiously significant border between China and Tibet. The reincarnation site of the Dalai Lama is a centuries-old tradition integral to the identity of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists; according to Tibetan customs, the current Dalai Lama, living in exile in India, could be reincarnated anywhere in the Greater Tibetan Region. But as the Chinese government has vowed to control the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation process in its effort to enforce its sovereignty over Tibet, Tibetans and the Dalai Lama have been forced to consider creative alternatives. The struggle to continue this tradition under current territorial delineations demonstrates the tension that often occurs between political and cultural borders.

I am greatly indebted to the individuals who worked tirelessly to make this Special Edition of the *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* possible. Senior Editor David Lee used his research experience to formulate the concept and editorial organization of this edition, and Managing Editor Melanie Berry brought editorial expertise and structure.
to our team. Our Associate and Assistant Editors all showed exemplary levels of intellect, creativity, and professionalism; their energy was the driving force behind this publication. I am thankful for the opportunity to work with each one of them and am happy to call them my friends.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Victor Cha, Dr. Michael Green, and Dr. Diana Kim for their invaluable guidance and suggestions. The Journal would also not be possible without the enduring patience and tenacity of our publisher Daye Shim Lee, who provided immeasurable support throughout the publication process of this Special Edition.

It has been a pleasure to work on this Special Edition of the Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs as Editor-in-Chief alongside the inspiring individuals at Georgetown University. This Special Edition tackles a topic as extensive as it is important, and I hope you enjoy reading it.

Abigail Becker
Editor-in-Chief
Safety and survival cannot be guaranteed in getting over borders. The caveat is dependent on person and place: depending on the citizenship and country of residence of an actor in question, some of the techniques elaborated in this brief essay may be more or less attractive to my reader. Luckily, reading offers a safe method of border crossing through looking into the lives of others. Borders tell different stories—not only about the nation or region, but also about lives that are ravaged. It is the latter—the ravaged—that are so often trampled over in the rush to ensure national and regional security.

What is the Work of a Border?

First and foremost, borders are about keeping some people here and other people there. Borders, of course, are both material and ideological. At times, a nation may claim a bit of territory, perhaps some historically disputed part of land, say, an uninhabited chunk of rock in a sea with two names, and in such a case borders are no longer just about people being here or there, but about resources from there getting used here. In the real, borders demarcate poverty and conflict—in other words, suffering. That is the greatest push factor for the legal and illegal movement of people, creating a disruption of borders in their various manifestations. In the era of the Anthropocene, we see another kind of border crossing. Environmental damage and destruction in the resources one nation floats, waterborne or airborne, into the food resources of another, threatening the lives of people elsewhere.

Agonies of poverty and conflict can be traced in the personal narratives of refugees and stateless persons across the globe as they endeavor to cross one border after another in
search of legality. Migrants, be they licit or otherwise, find that borders rise up to meet them in the form of police-led residence card inspections, discrimination in access to housing, and in other daily reminders that one can be ejected. Opportunity and risk largely shape which borders are crossed, where people cross, and their chances of success on the other side. Once there, another kind of crossing occurs: crossing into the culture of the other.

As an anthropologist, what comes to mind when I think about borders is that they indelibly shape socio-political dimensions of human life. Not merely where one goes to school, for example, or what entitlements are offered—but more critically, what difficulties and dangers one is compelled to live alongside. The number of children one cannot have. The internet pages one cannot read. The complaints against government one cannot make. The intellectual and creative desires one cannot fulfill. Further still, borders may shape if one can even live. And, if permitted to live, borders may determine the quality of living. It is not a metaphor to acknowledge that borders shape bodies.

**How the Korean Border Shapes Bodies**

You can link the effects of the North-South Korean border to the bones of people born on either side. The research of Pak, Schwekendiek, and Kim published in 2011 did just that. The study looked at height differences in Koreans born prior to and after the division of the Korean peninsula. When they examined the height of 6,512 defectors in South Korea, they found that those North Koreans born before the division of the Korean Peninsula were taller than their South Korean peers. Combined with this, and more damning still, they found that all “North Korean cohorts born thereafter were shorter than their South Korean counterparts.”

Stunting is the body’s way of sacrificing linear growth in order to survive. Stunting does not happen from a few missed meals; rather, it is the long-term result of protracted malnutrition at critical growth periods. The border between North and South Korea, arguably more than any other border in the region or world, demonstrates how political demarcation—borders—can materialize in the flesh and bones of citizens. This is demonstrated in the spread of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis and multi-drug resistant tuberculosis in North Korea. It is demonstrated in mortality rates. It is demonstrated in birth weights. It is demonstrated in the number of people who gamble their lives for a chance to get over the border.

As a scholar of human rights focused on the Korean peninsula since its division, it is hard for me to think of a border without also thinking of it as loathsome and heartbreaking. Borders protect the sovereign while the human struggles. Borders thwart our efforts to improve the human condition. Borders signal inequality and the limits on opportunity. As migration scholar and Oxford University Professor Bridget Anderson observed, “borders are a fantasy that sustains inequality.” This naturally leads me to

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2 Bridget Anderson, “Imagining a world without borders” (presentation, TEDxEastEnd, London,
reflect that borders are like the geopolitical manifestation of the face of Janus: at once the start and the end; at once the point of transition and the point of termination; at once part of the past and part of the future.

The border that divides Korea into North and South was arbitrarily drawn by foreign hands at the end of World War II to delineate US and Soviet occupying areas. The selection of the 38th parallel would later become the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) after the armistice that froze the Korean War. As Suk-Young Kim, a University of California Los Angeles scholar, observed, “For both South and North Koreans, one of the reasons the DMZ figures so prominently as natural trauma is that so few are able to cross it.” The DMZ is an emotionally traumatic feature of the land and national psyche of Koreans, and to cross the DMZ, Kim argues, is not “simply a neutral matter,” and—this short introductory piece will show—that other ways of transgressing the border are deliberately without neutrality.

How to Get Over a Border: Three Examples

Borders, like other loathsome and heartbreaking things in life, must be got over. From among the complex borders of Asia—which this issue explores—I share some field notes from one of the more complex, intractable, and stubborn of borders in the region: the DMZ. These three short vignettes emphasize that people are willing to bypass the DMZ physically, emotionally, and materially, no matter the costs.

Throw Your Life at It

When the young North Korean soldier Mr. Oh ran across the DMZ, cameras caught how the border fought to contain him. In fact, the cameras caught how benign and sleepy the actual border was—it seemed indifferent to his moment of courage—and by contrast, how driven, determined, and brutal that other border carried in the hearts and rifles of his comrades was.

Mr. Oh, age 24, fan of K-Pop and with a gut full of parasites, acted on his decision to run either to his death or to a new life on 13 November 2017 at three in the afternoon. Stationed at the Joint Security Area (JSA) on the Demilitarized Zone, he ran towards the South at one of the most dangerous, highly-guarded, and politically spectacular points of connection between the two Koreas. The escape was caught on United Nations Command CCTV cameras and eventually released, allowing the world to see his...
heart-stopping dash to freedom as North Korean AK-47-armed soldiers hunted him. He was shot at forty times by fourteen of his comrades and found bleeding nearly to death in a pile of leaves on the South Korean side.

North Korea has a de facto embargo on any of its citizens leaving the country without permission. This is a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 12, sections one and two, to which North Korea is a signatory. This covenant stipulates components related to the freedom of intra- and international movement. When the Korean People’s Army shot at the defecting soldier they were also violating one of the most basic of rights: Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to life, liberty, and personal security. Yet, the soldiers were following the instructions of their commander Kim Jong Un. Former officials from North Korea report that a person who defects from the North is deemed a treasonous individual who should be shot to death. This policy dates back to the early 1990s. If the soldiers had not chased Mr. Oh, if they had not tried to kill him, they would likely have been killed themselves. The footage captures all of these men running for their lives, for very different reasons. In his book On Strengthening Socialist Lawful Life, Kim Jong Il wrote, echoing the words of his father, “Our laws are important weapons for the realization of our national policies.” Under North Korea’s revised 2012 Penal Code, Article 63, “Treason against the Fatherland” stipulates that “those who betray the Fatherland by fleeing and surrendering to another country” are subject to capital punishment. How differently would the scenario have played out if Mr. Oh had been shot at the Sino-DPRK border? How many shots across that border would have been caught on camera?

A few days after Mr. Oh’s dash to freedom, Marc Knapper, the Chargé d’affaires ad interim at the American embassy in Seoul, tweeted a picture from the spot. It showed North Korean People’s Army soldiers digging a trench and planting trees to block the open space where the young Mr. Oh crossed. It is exceptionally rare for a person to cross the border between North and South Korea. Typically, such a journey is taken from North Korea across the Tumen River along the Sino-DPRK border into China. That route can last a few hours, and is only open to those with money, connections, and luck, but for those who only have their wits, the journey can take several years. Few defectors leave North Korea by boat. In July of 2016, a young North Korean defector

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was found wandering the streets of the western Japanese city of Nagato in Yamaguchi
prefecture. He told police he jumped from a shipping vessel and swam ashore using a
plastic flotation device.\(^9\) He stated that he was born in 1990 but had no identification
papers. In 2011, nine North Koreans spent five days at sea until the Japanese Coast
Guard picked them up. They were resettled to South Korea.

**Wear a Costume, Climb an Embassy Wall**

Forty-four North Koreans dressed up as construction workers gained entry to the Ca-
nadian Embassy in Beijing on 29 September 2004. Prior to this, two smaller groups of
North Koreans entered the same Canadian embassy in Beijing, and just a few weeks
earlier, eleven men, fifteen women, and three children from North Korea climbed ce-
ment walls and cut through a metal fence to gain entry to a Japanese school in the same
city.\(^10\) They were transferred to the Japanese Embassy and sought asylum.

North Koreans jumped embassy walls elsewhere too. In late September 2009, nine
North Koreans entered the Danish Embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam, seeking political asy-
llum and passage to Seoul.\(^11\) These embassy storming activities led China to circulate
memoranda to all foreign embassies and missions in the country. The memorandum
asked foreign governments to “inform the Consular Department of the Chinese Min-
istry of Foreign Affairs in case the illegal intruders were found, and hand over the
intruders to the Chinese public security organs.”\(^12\) The United Nations High Commis-
sion for Refugees released a statement informing embassies that handing over North
Koreans to Chinese authorities are acts tantamount to refoulment. The vast majority of
embassies ignored China’s demand.

Those who successfully scale the embassy walls generate a political crackdown on
their brethren still in hiding throughout China. But they also force themselves into
a face-to-face encounter with the state apparatus via diplomatic channels, compelling
norm-abiding states to permit their application for refugee status. Contrary to popular
belief, however, diplomatic missions and embassies do not enjoy full extraterritorial
rights; they are not the sovereign territory of those countries they represent, but are
rather bound to the laws of the host country. Nevertheless, their physical territory
is not to be trespassed by the host country unless given permission. For this reason,
refugees sometimes use embassies to escape the host country, the arm of local laws

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atimes.com/2016/07/suspected-north-korean-defector-found-in-japan-reports/ (date accessed: 26
April 2018).

\(^10\) “29 North Korean Defectors Burst into Japanese School in Beijing,” *Radio Free Asia*, 1 September
26 April 2018).


\(^12\) “Appendix B: Letter from Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Foreign Embassies MAY 31, 2002,”
accessed: 26 April 2018). See also: “The Invisible Exodus: North Koreans in the People’s Republic of
unable to reach them, and diplomatic channels can then be used to resolve the refugee problem. However, even this is not secure. Violations of embassy extraterritoriality have occurred.

Through the course of any one individual defector’s journey to be granted legal human rights, the individual is in fact compelled to act criminally. One has no right to rights, as Hannah Arendt phrased it in _The Origins of Totalitarianism_ in 1951. If one wants to activate their rights, they must wrest them from the sovereign through criminality: “the stateless person, without right to residence and without the right to work, had of course constantly to transgress the law.”13 They must seek out a broker or some other illicit system, such as a false passport, to gain entry into another country.14 Climbing the wall of an embassy, an illegal entry, is of course criminal. But in breaking the law, the refugee enables the law to include him or her—to recognize their human existence through recognizing them as a criminal.15 By breaking the law, ideally within countries that are democratic, the refugee is able to access a kind of human equality, even if as an exception to the norm.

**Send Your Message in a Bottle**

In the chilly February weather in 2018, South Korean rap music blaring, we set out in the car before sunrise to reach a maritime border between North and South Korea.16 Other cars, other activists, would meet us there. A pickup truck, weighed down with a mighty load of rice stuffed in plastic water bottles, was also making its way. The typical delays and confusions associated with coordinated activism ensued: someone needed coffee, another needed the bathroom. Were we on the right road? Would the water be too frozen to carry the bottles across the border? At one point it seemed everyone in the car, driver included, was on a mobile phone shouting directions and queries. As planned, a foreign journalist and her translator—hyped about the event they were about to witness—was picked up en route. Defiance, like all acts borne of passion, is exhilarating.

Like protagonists nearing the end of a long and difficult journey, one final snag tested our fortitude. A kind of “border-before-the-border” in the form of an angry farmer momentarily waylaid us—his land was ideally positioned for defector guerilla activists to intrude upon in their work. Common courtesy meant we had to get in and out of his property quickly so as not to catch his attention, but the narrow dirt road to the water’s edge which sat upon his land was blocked. A towering mid-weight excavator, its crane arm positioned like a fist pounding the earth, prevented us from driving the rice truck to the edge of the water. We had to unload and walk a kilometer with the supplies on our backs. This back and forth between the truck and the coastline took time; some rice

15 Arendt, _The Origins of Totalitarianism_ 286, also see 280.
16 The exact location is withheld for safety reasons.

was lost on the path and several people, as if to mourn the loss, stopped and stared. No matter. Such a setback was sheer child’s play compared to the challenges posed by the DMZ and the North Korean regime.

Near the water along the South Korean coast, we clustered in batches around the bottles. We undid the water bottle lids and put three more items in each: a USB, a U.S. dollar bill, and a single pink pill in a plastic-foil bubble (an anthelmintic to kill roundworms). Activists gifted with strong forearms were tasked with tightening the bottles in preparation for their long voyage into North Korean waters, into the nets of fishermen, into the hands of black-market sellers, into the homes of a lucky few. The rice could be sold, the money used, the pill sold or consumed, and the USB used as a portal into another world of entertainment. Before the final send off, an activist-leader among us spoke. “A North Korean can live for a month or two on what is in this bottle,” he said, holding one aloft. We stood around the mountain of bottles. Pictures were taken and prayers were said. Finally he shouted: “Throw them as far into the water as you can!” And, knowing they had to make it all the way to North Korea, we did.

Photographs by the author, taken in February 2018 near the border between North and South Korea. The water bottles are filled with USBs (loaded with movies, music, and other information), U.S. dollar bills, white rice, and anti-parasite medication.
Photograph by the author in February 2018 near the North and South Korea border. The sign reads "Love and Hope to the North Korean People." The men in the picture are former North Koreans citizens and activists.

It is true that borders signal division and inequality from historical grievances, but they are also places where past conflicts are sutured to the present—borders are sites of “connected disconnection.” Intriguingly, this feature of “connected disconnection characterizes” the present era quite well in that events which occur far away do impact our local environment, particularly in regards to technology and ecology. Against this contemporary trend blending the distant and the local, physical borders may have met their match. However, the cognate borders in the mind and heart—the earliest form of borders made from the robust material of human emotion and prejudice—may be strengthened or softened in the future. We will see.

Sandra Fahy is an associate professor of social and cultural anthropology at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. She has written two books on human rights issues in North Korea, Marching through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea (2015), and Dying for Rights: Putting North Korea’s Rights Abuses on the Record (forthcoming - August 2019), and has written extensively on North Korean human rights issues like food security and migration. Her research topics include collective suffering, trauma and memory, and the impact of structural violence on health.
On 1 May 2016, hundreds of angry Vietnamese marched through central Ho Chi Minh City, upending the meaning of International Workers’ Day. Rather than celebrating the global brotherhood of labor in its struggle against capitalist exploitation, they took to the streets to protest the damage inflicted on their own workers’ state by proletarians from the neighbouring workers’ state. Nationalism trumped internationalism.

The immediate cause of the protest was fish. Over the previous month, tons of dead fish had washed up on the shores of central Vietnam. The culprit was easy to identify: the Ha Tinh steel plant owned by a Taiwanese conglomerate and built by thousands of mainland Chinese migrant workers. After an incompetent cover-up, it emerged the plant had flushed something into the water that killed sea life for kilometres around. The fate of fish alone would not have caused so many to risk arrest and persecution by marching through Saigon; this case of industrial malpractice became a national scandal because, in just one incident, it touched so many of Vietnam’s “red button” issues: food safety, poor government accountability, massive corruption, and the influx of migrant labour. Some banners read “clean water, clean government” but the protest gained its emotional power because of the involvement of China—through a “Chinese” Taiwanese company and its Chinese workers.

Demonstrations occur more frequently in Vietnam than most people realize, but they are generally small-scale complaints about village land confiscation. Those protesters usually take care to assert their loyalty to the ruling Communist Party and focus their anger on particular officials. Anti-China protests attract a different kind of participant: urban, better educated, nationalistic—and disenchanted with one-party rule. The num-

The South China Sea

Where Tiny Rocks Make Big Waves

Bill Hayton
ber of both protests and protestors has been increasing recently, prompted by news of incidents in the South China Sea spread via the Internet.

China provokes strong reactions in Vietnam. The two cultures are so similar (particularly when compared with Vietnam’s other neighbours in Cambodia and Laos) that the emotions could be dismissed as, to borrow Dickens’ phrase, a case of “narcissism of minor difference.” However, these differences are crucial to the modern Vietnamese sense of self and also to a legacy of decades of struggle over the nature of the Vietnamese state.

In the eyes of anti-China protesters, Vietnamese diplomacy and compromise towards Beijing are not the wise actions of a weaker state against the stronger, but evidence of cowardice, if not treason. The implicit message, amplified by anti-communist exiles in the United States and elsewhere, is that the interests of the “Vietnamese nation” differ from those of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) because of the long-standing and intimate connections between it and its bigger brother to the north. For those of a certain outlook, “China” becomes a cipher for “communist.” For the CPV, to doubt the patriotism of its leadership is literally a crime.

Vietnam’s first significant grass-roots anti-China street protests took place in late 2007 after Beijing announced a new local government structure to administer the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Angry bloggers spread word of unauthorized demonstrations in front of both the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and the consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. For the first time, social media allowed citizens to bypass the barriers to discussion imposed on state-censored media. Even though the protests supported the country’s territorial claims, the Communist Party regarded them as a threat. It could not, however, be seen to suppress public expressions of patriotism. Instead members of the official Youth Union (dressed in matching T-shirts) were sent to take part in, take over, and then disband the protests.

Two weeks after the demonstrations began, Vietnam’s Information Ministry held a conference at which the head of the Press Department of the Communist Party’s Central Propaganda and Education Commission declared that “it’s all right that some bloggers have recently showed their patriotism, posting opinions about the Paracels and Spratly archipelagos on their weblogs. But some have sparked protest, causing public disorder and affecting the country’s foreign affairs.” Separating legitimate expressions of patriotism from threatening demonstrations of anti-communism is an awkward problem for the Vietnamese leadership.

A perfect example of the risks of protest came in May 2014 when China’s deployment of the HS-981 oilrig into disputed waters near the Paracels prompted another round of street protests. These protests were initially tolerated by the Vietnamese government as the government was also infuriated by the Chinese move. However, groups with other grievances took advantage of the breakdown of order. In a few places, gangs rampaged

through industrial parks, venting their anger on factories displaying signs in Chinese characters (even though most of them, ironically, were Taiwan or Singapore-owned). There were even reports of military units being placed on the bridges leading into Ho Chi Minh City to prevent protestors from reaching the metropolis. The most violent protests targeted around five thousand Chinese migrant workers at the Ha Tinh steel plant. At least five were killed by locals angry about the presence of so many foreigners in a place where well-paid jobs were hard to find.

These episodes had local triggers that were clearly underpinned by antipathy towards China and to some extent, Chinese people. And, they illustrated to an alarmed Communist Party how a “good” nationalist protest can swiftly evolve into something more threatening.

The leadership of the CPV found itself in a particularly difficult position because it had deliberately chosen to use public opinion as a diplomatic weapon. It sent Vietnamese and international reporters out to sea with the coastguard ships that were confronting their Chinese rivals. The pictures they broadcasted showed small Vietnamese vessels being rammed and sunk by larger Chinese ships. It was a media-friendly metaphor for Vietnam's David and Goliath struggle. Coverage of angry protests on land was also useful to the Vietnamese leadership’s efforts to convince Beijing that it could not be seen to back down in the confrontation.

The approach seemed to work. On 15 July, after weeks of hostile headlines in the international media, China brought the crisis to a swift end by announcing the withdrawal of the oilrig a month earlier than planned. Neither country’s leadership wanted the crisis to continue and both worked swiftly to restore normal relations. For the CPV, this was simply a pragmatic way to manage the country’s most important relationship. For the most extreme nationalists, it was more evidence of betrayal.

Just three months later, on 16 October, Vietnam dispatched a very high-level military delegation to Beijing. Official press reports noted that the two sides discussed ways to “manage public opinion” on the South China Sea issue. At the end of the same month, the two communist parties held their tenth “theory seminar” in the Vietnamese highland resort town of Dalat to share “experiences in building a socialist country under rule of law.” Politburo members responsible for ideology and propaganda led each side’s delegation: Liu Qibao on the Chinese side and Đinh Thế Huynh on the Vietnamese. Reading between the lines, the agenda focused on limiting the influence of hostile nationalism on both sides of the border. Normal business had resumed.

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These episodes reveal the difficulties that the Communist Party of Vietnam has in managing nationalist opinion. In many ways, they are the same problems faced by their Chinese comrades on the other side of the border. Jessica Chen Weiss has argued that in China, the authorities have many factors to assess before deciding whether to allow a nationalist protest.\(^5\) A key consideration is whether the protest can be used as a signal to a diplomatic adversary. Streets filled with angry citizens emphasize the message that any government retreat would have severe domestic consequences. However, empowering such sentiment limits the leadership’s freedom to maneuver and repressing it later can be politically costly; “the government must weigh the potential benefits of tolerating street demonstrations against the risk to stability,” she argues.

**A Vexed History**

Vietnam and China have had a vexed history over the past half-century. Initially, relations were good: after the 1949 revolution in China, the communist leaderships on both sides of the border found common cause. China supported the Vietnamese communists throughout their wars with regimes backed by France (1946–1954) and by the United States (1965–1975). In the 1950s, it was common for nationalists in the communist half of Vietnam (“North Vietnam”) to praise China.\(^6\) At the time, the U.S.-backed government in Saigon (“South Vietnam”) was trying to discredit the Hanoi authorities by linking them with Beijing. Hanoi responded by defending China’s support for Vietnamese nationalism and contrasting it with Saigon’s dependence on France and the United States.

The political scientist Kosal Path has argued that the “northern” anti-Chinese narrative only dates to about 1965, when Vietnamese intellectuals in North Vietnam started to write about Vietnam’s supposed “history of resistance to Chinese aggression.” According to Path, the change was precipitated by concerns in North Vietnam that the extremism unleashed during the Cultural Revolution in China might take hold in Hanoi.\(^7\) To guard against such a possibility, the CPV began to encourage a degree of anti-Chinese sentiment in the North, although not to the extent that had become normal in the South. This became stronger after Beijing opened contacts with the United States in 1972. As it became obvious that North Vietnam would win the war, Chinese support for the war waned, and it started to oppose Vietnamese unification.\(^8\) In response, Hanoi slowly transferred its allegiance to Moscow and appropriated the theme of steadfast patriotic resistance to Chinese aggression.

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A critical moment came in January 1974, when Chinese forces invaded and occupied the western half of the Paracel Islands (in the north of the South China Sea), capturing the Vietnamese marines garrisoned there and defeating a small South Vietnamese naval force. This battle, which took place a few days before the Têt festival, was portrayed as a great patriotic confrontation by the Saigon government—a rallying point for a regime that was increasingly threatened by a renewed offensive on land from the “Chinese-backed” communists. The sea battle only reinforced a feeling of national violation. The returning sailors and released marines were splashed across the national media as heroes in the Vietnamese nation’s perpetual struggle against China. Weeks later, the Saigon government deployed marines on several of the Spratly Islands (in the southern part of the South China Sea) to prevent China from seizing them as well. By then, attitudes towards China had begun to shift in Hanoi too. Even before they seized Saigon, communist forces took over the South Vietnamese garrisons on the Spratlys to prevent China from seizing the islands.

It should be clear, even from this abbreviated history, that these events made the islands a focus for national identity during a time of tumultuous change in Vietnamese society. For the dying anti-communist regime, they became a site of heroic sacrifice. In its narrative, the Paracels were seized by the Chinese allies of their communist enemies. Evidence of collusion between the two, in particular their diplomatic dealings in the 1950s, was—and still is—offered as proof of the treacherous nature of the communist regime. For the communists, their subsequent role in protecting the islands from Chinese advances allows them to claim that, by standing firm, they were and still are the most effective defenders of the national interest.

It is now a mainstream Vietnamese view that China poses a clear threat to the country and the nation. The South China Sea is seen as the frontline in an existential struggle. Vietnam also has territorial and maritime disputes in the same region with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but those disputes generate just a tiny fraction of the emotion induced by disputes with China.

**China’s Story**

The islands have played a similar role in modern Chinese identity formation, although the history is more convoluted. Briefly, nationalists in southern China first took an interest in offshore islands in 1909 in the context of disputes with Japan. The Qing authorities annexed the Paracels in June of that year but lost interest in them almost immediately afterwards. Chinese attention only returned in the late 1920s as rivalry with both Japan and France intensified. In mid-1933, when France publicly annexed several of the Spratly Islands, demonstrations broke out in the streets of several major cities, and national debate was seized by the perceived need to defend these pieces of “Chinese territory” from foreign invasion.

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9 Bill Hayton, “The modern origins of China’s claims in the South China Sea,” *Modern China* forthcoming.
However, an examination of newspapers and official documents from this time makes clear that hardly anyone in China even knew where these islands were! In fact, the Chinese Government had to ask the French and American governments for maps to find out which islands had been annexed. In many newspaper articles, journalists, politicians and experts confused the Paracels (which China had previously claimed) with the Spratlys (which it had never claimed) and sometimes even the Taya Islands, which lie just off the Chinese coast.

Nonetheless, over the subsequent decade the Chinese government became convinced that it had a long-standing right to claim all the islands south of its coast, almost as far as Borneo, 1,500 kilometers away. The struggle to “recover” those islands (even though there was no evidence that they had ever been under Chinese administration previously), particularly after the Second World War, became a nationalist cause célèbre for another regime facing communist advance. Being seen to recover the ancestral land from the predations of the imperialist became a badge of honour for the Chinese Nationalists under Chiang Kai Shek. The Chinese expedition to claim the islands in late 1946 was a moment of particular celebration. Later, after the success of the 1949 revolution, the Chinese communists felt the need to assert their own patriotic defence of the islands with innumerable articles and even at least one feature film.

**Building on Rock**

This, I would argue, is why the fate of tiny, virtually uninhabitable rocks and reefs has become so important to both regime and people in China and Vietnam. My research has shown how the claims were constructed by governments and activists decades ago to justify a newly-found sense of attachment to the islands. In both countries, the struggle to claim the islets became bound up with the process of constructing new national identities. China’s claim emerged because of its conflict with imperial powers during a period when the country was torn by ideological and geographical divisions. Vietnam’s claim was also asserted in the midst of a civil war and against an enemy which seemed to pose an existential threat.

In both countries, claims that were constructed during struggles for national independence subsequently became markers of belonging as fragile, post-colonial states attempted to forge unity after decades of division. The claims evolved into public expressions of national identity. It is no surprise that they became imbued with cultural and political power. For their advocates, historical evidence is less important than emotional certainty.

Particular historical narratives are critical foundations of the legitimacy of the communist parties in both Vietnam and China. Until the late 1980s, they both claimed to be leading their peoples on a revolutionary road to liberation. After that, both communist parties discovered the need to compromise with capitalist countries and subsequently become more capitalistic societies in themselves. Their claims to national legitimacy had to shift away from the struggle for socialist utopia towards delivering material benefits to their people in the present and to telling a story of national salvation in which
they saved their countries from foreign invasion and oppression.

The occupation of the islands is now part of both parties’ victory narratives and the importance of completing that victory—by “recovering” the remainder of the islands for the nation—is reinforced daily in school lessons and the official media. And yet neither party is willing to risk war to force the issue to conclusion. The territorial claim is a journey without end.

The communist parties in China and Vietnam promote and manipulate national sentiments to one end above all: to remain in power. Nonetheless, they are not entirely cynical in their endeavours. After years of exposure to their own nationalist narratives, they no doubt believe it to be true. The problem for the region is that the “official histories” propagated by each side are mutually exclusive. The claims are framed in terms of rights to entire archipelagos: claims to all of the Paracels and all of the Spratlys. My own research has shown that there is little evidence to support such exclusivist positions. The South China Sea has always been a shared domain.

Recent developments, in particular, China’s siege on the Philippine base at the Second Thomas Shoal in 2013–2014 and its ongoing blockade of Scarborough Shoal reveals that leadership in Beijing is intent on occupying more territory. It apparently remains convinced that China is the rightful owner of every feature within the U-shaped line that has been printed on Chinese maps since 1948. This sense of entitlement is derived from an unfounded historical narrative that emerged episodically during the first half of the twentieth century. It is now imperative for peace in the South China Sea that China is directly challenged to provide verifiable evidence for its claim.

Despite the certainty they express domestically, no government is sufficiently confident of its historic claim to ask an international court to rule on the territorial questions at the heart of the South China Sea disputes. To lose in such a public forum would unsettle public opinion with unpredictable consequences. It is much easier for regimes to act as if they are continuing along a journey towards eventual victory. In both countries, the fate of the Paracels and the Spratlys is used to generate popular support for the ruling party—but it is risky. Do the two communist parties intend to permanently maintain their populations on the edge of nationalist anxiety in order to remain in power and signal their diplomatic resolve to their adversary? If the levels of popular passion become too high, it can result in demands for total victory and then criticism of the party for failing to deliver it.

Perhaps the parties believe this is a viable strategy, but both countries, and the region more widely, also need a stable and peaceful South China Sea in order to develop and prosper. This will require de-escalating the disputes. Managing a process through which rival governments recognize that their claims are not exclusive and that others may also have rights will be politically difficult and time-consuming. It will, however, remove the key source of conflict and unlock the problem of how best to share the limited resources of the sea.
Given how much national pride has been invested in these tiny islets, it is unreasonable to expect any of the claimants to abandon those they currently occupy. And if none will be given up voluntarily then none can be peacefully ‘recovered’ by any claimant. The best hope for a peaceful future in the South China Sea, therefore, is to maintain the status quo—despite vocal criticism from those who march in the streets. All the South-east Asian claimants have informally reached the same conclusion. China has not, and that is why it poses the largest threat to peace and security in the South China Sea.

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It may be tempting to think that Japan’s demographic trends would provide an incentive for adopting major immigration policy reforms, but so far, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has chosen to tread carefully, calling for massive migration while rejecting an official shift to immigration or integration policies. Recent estimates indicate that the portion of Japan’s population aged sixty-five and older will steadily grow from 27 percent in 2015 to 38 percent by 2053, but the share of Japan’s foreign resident population remains well under 2 percent.¹ The growing portion of seniors is leading to declines in the available labor pool, consumer purchasing, and the overall health of the economy, along with increases in the old-age dependency ratio, welfare state costs, and demand for chronic health care services. Already, Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare was reporting at the end of June 2017 that labor market conditions were as tight as they were in 1992 toward the end of the bubble economy.² For providers of senior care specifically, the difficulties of hiring care workers for residential facilities and at-home care have been accompanied by a readiness among some of them to employ foreign migrants.³

The medley of methods for increasing migration that are situated in Abe’s broader economic competitiveness strategy has potentially dramatic implications, even with-

³ As seen in the annual report of surveys conducted by Kaigo rōdō antei sentā. Also see: "Gaikokujin kaigo ’Shinjidai’ e,” Shiruba shinpō, 1 January 2017.
out fundamental immigration policy change. By using migration selectively, the Abe government is focusing on short- and medium-term measures to boost specific segments of the economy while opting for more flexible policies to facilitate long-term settlement for select groups. Policies attempt to use temporary visitors in ways that can contribute labor and economic energy and innovation while avoiding a long-term commitment to social costs or risking that a larger immigrant population might not do much to reverse the overall trend of population aging.\(^4\) Japan is already attracting visible and growing numbers of international visitors for work, study, and short-term visits. Despite the triple disasters of 2011 that temporarily depressed migration to Japan between 2010 and 2016, the annual number of short-term visitors (such as tourists, businesspersons, and guests of relatives and friends) increased by 170 percent, from about 7.6 million to over 20 million in 2016, a record high. The number of international students in institutions of higher education grew about 21 percent between 2010 and 2016. Similarly, although the data are probably quite understated, the number of foreign residents reported to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare as employed in Japan grew by 67 percent during the same period.\(^5\)

But how far are these trends and Abe’s policy directions likely to take Japan? Unlike efforts to increase the number of temporary visitors considered likely to most contribute to Japan economically, national policies to facilitate incorporation of foreign residents as members of society remain limited, despite the mushrooming of supports for international tourists. The limited and highly selective approach of the national government to social inclusion of foreign residents raises questions about Abe’s strategy. Not only are misunderstandings likely to rise with the rapid increase in the number of foreign visitors and workers, the failure to provide a solid basis for foreign residents’ inclusion and protections may well undermine Japan’s competitiveness in attracting students, employees, and tourists, thus making this strategy unsustainable.

**Medium-Term Migration Without an Immigration Policy**

The government has actively tried to promote international migration to benefit the economy through encouraging study, employment, and tourism opportunities, while maintaining the precedent of resisting a major shift to an immigration policy. Except for a point system for accepting highly-skilled professionals, which was planned before Abe’s installation and whose use is still limited, the government has failed to significantly ease options for permanent settlement or establish a national system of integration policies. Nor have Abe and his economic policy advisors made migration a core policy strategy as such, but rather they have encouraged diverse forms of short-


and medium-term migration to secure labor for specific sectors, provide supports for Japanese women to join the workforce, and stimulate economic growth and competitiveness. Abe has continued to insist that his administration is “not at all considering a so-called immigration policy,” but the policies have potentially dramatic economic and social consequences by heightening Japan’s reliance on non-Japanese and multiplying the presence of foreign residents in everyday life.6

The prime minister’s broad plans for economic revitalization, begun soon after he came to office for the second time in late December 2012, have integrated expansion of migration as part of the larger economic agenda; the planned 2020 Summer Olympics have compounded the incentives for doing this. After becoming prime minister, Abe instituted economic reform discussions in cabinet-level councils dominated by economic advisors and industry leaders. By June 2014, the resulting plan for Japan’s “Revitalization Strategy” was adopted as a cabinet resolution. Although some of the strategy’s plans for migration are supposed to boost employment in specific sectors, others revolve around expanding tourism and improving economic and academic competitiveness.7 To further support Japanese women’s entry into the labor force, the plan provides for short-term migration by foreign household workers to a handful of metropolitan areas in special strategic economic zones, an initiative that has already begun. A large-scale overhaul and expansion of Japan’s Technical Intern Training Program (TITP, previously known as the “trainee” program), which allows workers to obtain and practice skills for a few years, will increase skilled foreign construction workers in advance of the 2020 Olympics, along with satisfying other needs in shipbuilding.8 To meet growing demand for care workers for Japan’s senior population, measures now legislated will facilitate the migration of foreign-born care workers by adding care work to the TITP and by creating a separate visa for care work as skilled employment, applicable to certified care workers who have graduated from a Japanese post-secondary program for care work.9

Other provisions highlight competitiveness. The push to increase the number of international students—the “300,000 International Students Plan” for 2020—combines the aspiration of remaining academically competitive with the benefit of having international students contribute to the labor force. Whether Japan has a chance of reaching that target depends on how one adds the numbers. Technically, this target excludes international students in Japanese language schools and includes only those in other post-secondary schooling, who amounted to 171,000 in May 2016.10 But given that an additional 68,000 were studying in Japanese language schools, possibly in preparation

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6 Statement made by Prime Minister Abe on 28 January 2016 at the plenary session of the House of Representatives.
7 Although this strategy was subsequently somewhat updated in 2015, the 2014 plan presents elaborate and detailed plans concerning migration of foreigners.
8 Until November 2016, the limit was a total of three years, but this is being extended to five years for those who meet renewal criteria.
for entering other educational programs, the goal of 300,000 may be in sight by 2020, but it is not assured. Linking highly-skilled graduates of Japanese universities to employment in Japan after graduation is one element of this strategy, but possibly as (or more) important for the labor force is that international students also constitute a pool of likely part-time workers during their studies.

Making Japan attractive to professionals, as in the past, is a priority today. In December 2016, the total of foreign residents whose visa statuses fell in the general category of skilled, professional, or technical expert was 36 percent higher than four years earlier. Beyond the government’s general encouragement of employing foreign skilled professionals, since 2012 a new point system grants special visas to “highly-skilled professionals” with preferential conditions such as allowing more flexibility to bring family members and a much faster path to permanent residency. Although the program got off to a slow start, its use has escalated, with over eight thousand five hundred professionals taking advantage of it as of June 2017. In addition to this visa, existing visa statuses for professional employment are available alongside and account for the vast majority of skilled and professional employment. Other initiatives encourage Japanese universities to hire international faculty, and it has become easier for Japanese firms with overseas subsidiaries to bring skilled foreign staff to work in Japan. In sum, Abe has set high expectations in policies for foreign nationals to contribute to Japan through work and study, but only select groups are given preference in policies to facilitate their long-term stay.

Tourists versus Those who Stay

The Abe government has also distanced itself from the issues of foreign settlers by failing to respond to ongoing calls for a coordinated and proactive approach to integration of foreign residents, despite the government’s rhetoric of making Japan appealing to foreign visitors and highly-skilled workers. While services for tourists and other short-term visitors have become a priority, more flexible conditions to facilitate permanent residency are limited mainly to beneficiaries of the new point system, and little has been done in the way of national coordination of policies to strengthen foreign residents’ social and economic inclusion.

Efforts to expand and support tourism have taken off, with the goal of attracting 30 million visitors annually to Japan by 2030. Improvements in accessibility and marketing efforts to attract tourists are moving forward. Japan’s Immigration Bureau has added staff and staff language training. Streamlined entry procedures were already visible in May 2017 at Narita Airport, and the number of free wifi hotspots aimed at international visitors continues to grow. Local regions, including those outside of the usual tourist routes, are working to improve their brands and attract tourists. Both


[23] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
multilingual services and efforts to make travel inside the country easier are growing. For instance, beginning in March 2017 for one year on a trial basis, short-term visitors to Japan could purchase a Japan Rail Pass for the Japanese Railways (JR) instead of having to purchase them before traveling to Japan. Tourism for shopping has become a big business, especially for tourists from other parts of Asia. Anyone who has traveled to Japan recently cannot escape the pervasive “tax-free” shopping opportunities for short-term international visitors, with the number of tax-free shops expected to double between 2014 and 2020. In these and other respects, efforts to improve Japan's attractiveness and supports for foreign tourists are intense.

Yet Abe’s policies continue a longstanding avoidance of a proactive approach to foreign residents’ integration. Japan has experienced substantial low-key but widespread change over the past two to three decades through the local growth of culturally diverse societies and local initiatives for foreign residents’ inclusion, but calls for national policies have yielded minimal progress so far. Despite some movement under the administration of the Democratic Party of Japan, there is still no nationally-coordinated set of integration policies for foreign residents, let alone a general easing of movement from temporary to permanent residency or, ultimately, naturalization. Local communities and civil society groups continue to take on much of the responsibility for providing supports to migrants and immigrants on top of social welfare policies established for Japanese citizens or very limited measures provided by the national government for non-native speakers’ public education. Local governments provide multilingual information and counseling services adapted to the linguistic needs of their populations, and many make active efforts to include foreign residents in policy consultations or to facilitate their interaction with the community. Depending on the locality, local governments, non-profits, or both working together, provide a variety of measures to support non-Japanese students through schools, such as hiring bilingual teachers, providing transitional classrooms for non-native speakers, setting up after-school tutoring programs, and creating supports for children to advance to middle school and high school. Public housing access for foreign residents is also generally determined at the local level. Some local areas, in the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009, went so far as to create employment opportunities for foreign residents who had lost their jobs. Local communities, migration experts, and some public intellectuals have called for a national agency for foreign residents’ integration for almost two decades, but this has not come about. The gap between local society and national policy was clear at the 2015 annual meeting of a conference of cities with large foreign-resident populations, where an intense discussion by local mayors stressed to the national elites present the need for a full-fledged immigration policy.

13 See the Japan Railways website for information: http://japanrailpass.net/en/about_jrp.html (date accessed: 26 April 2018).
15 This was the meeting of the Conference of Cities with Large Foreign Populations (Gaikokujin shū-jū toshi kaigi), held in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka, 7 December 2015, which the author attended. For documents related to this organization and its annual meetings, see http://www.shujutoshi.jp (date accessed: 26 April 2018).
Aid versus Resettlement for Refugees

The lack of encouragement for socially incorporating foreigners is also visible in the response to refugees, who have not significantly touched Japanese life. Although the Japanese government has contributed large sums of financial support for refugees abroad for many years, its review of asylum applications is strict. Applicants not recognized as refugees may in some cases receive a long-term residence visa for humanitarian reasons. In 2017, 19,629 persons applied for refugee status, but out of the 11,367 cases reviewed during that year, only twenty were granted refugee status, with another forty-five receiving visas on humanitarian grounds. Of the eighty-two nationalities represented by asylum-seekers, Filipinos were the most numerous (4,895), followed by Vietnamese (3,116), Sri Lankans (2,226), and Indonesians (2,038). The number of asylum applications received in 2017 was nearly double the 10,901 applications of the previous year.\(^{16}\)

The low recognition rate does not mean that Japan has been untouched by international refugee conditions, however. Instead of resettling large numbers of refugees or working to markedly increase the number granted asylum after applying in Japan, Abe’s government has given humanitarian and development assistance for countries close to those from which refugees flee.\(^{17}\) The government has committed billions of dollars in aid for Middle Eastern countries and for refugees since 2015; besides pledging general aid totaling $4 billion in 2015 to Middle Eastern countries for assisting refugees, in September 2016, Abe promised $2.8 billion for refugee aid over three years.\(^{18}\) In June 2017, the Japanese government announced emergency grants-in-aid of about $10 million for Uganda to respond to refugees from South Sudan, and in July 2017, Abe concluded an agreement with Jordan’s Prime Minister Al-Mulki that included $12.6 million in grants for basic water and sanitation infrastructure to help Jordan provide services to its 1.3 million Syrian refugees.\(^{19}\)

What is Stopping Abe?

Why has the Abe government chosen to eagerly invite foreign visitors and employees, while avoiding the topic of broad social inclusion, even for those already settled in Japan? It does not take access to behind-the-scenes decision-making to speculate on the reasons. First, Abe himself appears to prefer limited options for immigration. Certainly, his strong alliance with far-right groups with strongly nationalist positions, such

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17 Japan resettles from Malaysia a small number of refugees from Myanmar in coordination with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.
18 For instance, see: “Shiria nanmin shien,” Yomiuri shimbun, 26 September 2015; “Shiria shien ni 11-oku doru,” Asahi shimbun, 22 September 2016; and similar newspaper coverage.

as the rejection of local voting rights for foreigners, suggests that he would be reluctant
to encourage increased political or social incorporation of non-Japanese. Second, Abe
is unlikely to allow any issues—including immigration—to derail his core agendas of
defense policy reforms, constitutional revision, and economic reforms. Opening up
the discussion on easing the current principles governing immigration would divert
attention from his main policy objectives and likely further undermine support for
his administration. Third, despite his resistance to major changes in immigration, Abe
faces strong pressures to boost the economy and increase the pool of workers available
across many sectors. But because efforts by his and previous administrations to meet
demand with unused domestic labor, such as women and older workers, have proven
inadequate, he has opted to rely on selective measures for employment migration while
limiting the possibilities for settlement.

Are the Policies Sustainable, with What Effects?

Overall, the disparate measures being taken in Japan to encourage migration fall short
of major immigration reform and are designed, for the most part, to promote economic
growth while keeping migration temporary and avoiding social costs associated with
immigration. But are these policy directions sustainable as conceived? There are a num-
ber of reasons to expect that Abe’s approach may be ineffective.

The steep rise in foreigners’ presence itself may have a perverse effect. As in the late 1980s,
the presence of foreigners in Japan is already very much on the upswing and likely to
intensify. Although Japan’s social and policy conditions are now far more prepared to
incorporate international residents than they were thirty years ago, they may not be
enough to counter negative reactions from the general Japanese population and elected
officials to this large presence. As first-time short-term visitors to Japan quickly grow
in numbers, especially in regions that are off the beaten track, many small interactions
are likely to influence Japanese perceptions of foreigners and vice-versa, whether by
breaking down the sense of barriers or by magnifying tensions over linguistic differenc-
es and cultural expectations. Such conditions could easily dampen enthusiasm for using
foreign nationals to fuel the economy, lead to some of the same abuses of twenty-five
years ago, and likewise alienate foreign visitors and discourage others from visiting
Japan.

The lack of a well-planned and nationally-coordinated set of integration policies may under-
cut Japan’s efforts to compete internationally for labor and short-term visitors.
The competition for foreign residents and visitors is not limited to highly-skilled pro-
fessionals, but extends to other medium-skilled workers, international students, tour-
ists, and even short-term visitors seeking medical care: the “new newcomers” are a
very diverse group. In competing for these groups, including medium-skilled workers
such as care workers, Japan’s government will need to consider the full range of so-
cial conditions in which these visitors find themselves, including not just salary and
immediate work conditions (for the employed), but such things as flexibility of work
visas, the option of permanent residency, social supports, and general social receptivity.
Although Japan’s policy discussions have encompassed some attention to supports for
these groups, fully grasping the needs and making those supports available are separate matters. Access to medical care, linguistic supports, recourse against mistreatment by owners of lodging, access to police protection when they are victims of crime, protections from employers, and access to the educational system are examples of the recurrent challenges foreign residents face, yet only a few of these issues have surfaced in planning discussions. Furthermore, to the extent that the planned supports serve mainly temporary visitors and do not create a landscape receptive to non-Japanese for long-term or permanent residence, Japan could easily lose its luster with the very groups the prime minister aims to attract.

Japan's experience in the late 1980s highlights the potential in a tight labor market for widespread abuses of foreign-born workers if social supports and integration measures are not actively pursued. In the 1980s, unmet demand for workers stimulated employers' eagerness to hire foreign workers, leading to large numbers of overstayers and employer abuses. Today's tight labor market could easily lead to a repeat of past patterns in the recruiting and employing workers who, after coming to Japan as tourists or students, remain as overstayers. Many potential employers are already trying to exploit a variety of legal mechanisms for recruiting and employing foreign employees, whether as international students working part-time, as interns recruited from foreign universities, as regular employees hired abroad and then brought to Japan to work, or as relatives of Japanese who may be eligible for a long-term residence visa. Unless the restructured TITP proves to be significantly better than the previous system at preventing abuses, the program's expansion could also easily worsen worker mistreatment and worker flight to underground employment, producing yet more international criticism of Japan.

Taken together, these likely outcomes suggest that the policy goals of attracting foreign visitors and residents may not be sustainable. Backlash from inside and outside of Japan, Japan's inability to compete successfully with other countries for the groups it seeks to attract, and lack of adequate social protections and inclusion for foreign residents could all undermine the effort.

Furthermore, even if foreign migration that benefited the economy were sustainable, Japan's economic challenges extend beyond those that migration is intended to address.

As a subset of measures to promote economic growth, foreign residents and tourists will not compensate for the broader problem of regional economic disparities. Abe's plan for Japan's revitalization is broad, with narrow migration goals as only one element. At the same time, it is important for outsiders to recognize that the structural disparities inside Japan suggest that even a more flexible opening to migration, whether temporary or permanent, would not be a panacea for the economic and demographic challenges that Japan faces. The ageing of the population has occurred together with depopulation, economic weakness, and changing medical care needs in some regions, but with strong demand for labor and intense turnover across sectors in other areas with stronger economies. Tourism alone is not a likely basis for stimulating depressed regions, and the national availability of foreign workers across skill levels may offer few solutions for the regional inequalities that bedevil Japan. Immigrant workers are
likely to congregate in flourishing areas where employment opportunities are plentiful, competition for labor intense, and social networks for foreign residents more available. From this perspective, there may be advantages to increasing foreign residents, but they are unlikely to be a solution for core economic challenges that Abe's larger strategy is intended to address.

Ultimately, politics will determine whether Japan continues with its “non-immigration immigration policy,” through which significant numbers of foreigners are already working, settling, marrying, and having families. If Abe's desired patterns of migration continue to flourish, they will likely produce further pressures for changes in both immigration and integration policies. Implementing a few changes could make a big difference. A coordinating agency for foreign residents' integration, proposed for years by various experts and nongovernmental organizations, could officially acknowledge and legitimize foreign residents' presence and their social contribution, in addition to ensuring financial support and guidance to local governments that currently bear much of the responsibility for foreign residents' integration. Changes such as this might increase the likelihood that international graduates of Japanese universities, for whom post-graduation employment visas are possible, would opt to remain in Japan to work, especially if recruitment and hiring processes to reach these graduates were expanded. Other policy changes to enable recognition of foreign-earned care-worker credentials and the granting of a skilled care-work visa to these workers would create greater competitiveness for workers while signaling greater respect for overseas credentials. These are just a few examples of possible concrete policy changes that could be made, but in the meantime, for as long as Abe is prime minister (and possibly longer), we should not expect official policy to change much.

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Different Hmong Political Orientations and Perspectives on the Thailand–Laos Border

Ian Baird

Borders mean different things to different peoples. By now this is widely understood within academia, but there is still the propensity to assume shared essentialized perceptions of borders amongst groups based on ethnicity. Indeed, in Southeast Asia we frequently hear of cross-border solidarity largely based on ethnic and linguistic affinities.¹ In this short essay my goal is to partially upend such assumptions by illustrating how one particular border—between Thailand and Laos, in the relatively remote border between Mae Charim District, Nan Province, in northern Thailand and Nam Phou District, Xayaboury Province in northern Laos—took on quite different meanings during the 1980s and 1990s. These differences existed not only between lowland and upland peoples, or between those in one ethnic group or another, but also between peoples who self-identify as being in the same ethnic group, and who speak the same language: Hmong.²

This essay demonstrates that different groups of Hmong people have considerable agency when it comes to the ways they view the same border. The shared history and

¹ Consider, for example, the Kachin/Jingpo cross-border signs of support in Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² A few hundred years ago, ethnic Hmong people began migrating to the south from modern-day Yunnan Province in southern China, fleeing conflicts with Han Chinese, or in search of fertile land to conduct swidden cultivation. The Hmong (frequently referred to as the Miao in China) crossed into present-day Vietnam from China. From there some crossed into what is now northeastern Laos and some traveled further west until they crossed into present-day northern Thailand. For more information see Robert D. Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: the “Miao” Rebellion, 1854-1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994) and Mai Na M. Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).
language between various groups of Hmong have not prevented Hmong people in Laos and Thailand from aligning themselves with differently oriented political groups, thus leading to quite varied conceptualizations of the border. The Hmong in the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), being focused on the nation-state of Thailand, were never interested in challenging the existence of this border. Meanwhile, the Hmong in the Chao Fa Democratic Party, who were interested in establishing a Hmong state, viewed challenging the border as necessary for achieving their political goals.

The Hmong in the Communist Party of Thailand

The CPT was first established in the 1930s, but it was not until the 1960s that it significantly expanded. It was also at this time that the CPT began focusing its recruitment efforts on rural areas.\(^3\) Armed conflict began in northeastern Thailand in August 1965, and expanded to northern Thailand by mid-1967. Within a couple of years, the CPT had established “liberated” areas in a number of high mountain areas in northern Thailand, particularly along the border between Laos and Thailand.\(^4\) Large numbers of Hmong people in northern Thailand joined the CPT in the mountains.\(^5\)

Six liberated areas were established in Nan Province, Thailand. \(Khet \#6\), the southern-most liberated zone was located in a Hmong-dominated area of Mae Charim district, adjacent to the border with Laos. Between the 1960s and 1979, being adjacent to the border represented an important advantage for the CPT, since it allowed them to obtain supplies from China via Laos, send people to study in Laos, and establish storage areas and training schools on the Lao side of the border.

However, the situation greatly shifted in 1979 as the CPT became embroiled in the ideological and political conflict between the Chinese and the Soviet-aligned Vietnamese and Lao governments, siding with the Chinese. The Lao government ordered the CPT to remove all its facilities from Lao territory on short notice, and the border was closed to the CPT.\(^6\) Thus, whereas being adjacent to the border had been a great advantage to the CPT for well over a decade, it suddenly became a potential liability. In fact, political tensions between the Lao communists and the CPT became so tense that there were concerns that the Pathet Lao might attack CPT bases on the Thai side of the border. Therefore, some CPT offices were relocated from eastern Nan Province to \(Khet \#7\) in Pong District, Phayao Province, located somewhat farther away from the border.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Chaturon Chaiseng, personal communication, Bangkok, July 12, 2017.
In 1979 and the early 1980s, the CPT suffered a number of additional blows, including China’s decision to shut down the CPT’s clandestine radio station in Kunming, China, and to cease providing material support to the CPT (Marks 1994; Baker 2003). This decision was made to appease the Thai government, which supported China in transporting arms and other supplies to the Khmer Rouge, who had regrouped along the Thailand-Cambodia border after the Vietnamese had invaded Cambodia and ousted them from power soon after invading at the end of 1978. In addition, a Thai government decision—first in 1980 and again in 1982—to offer amnesties to all people within the CPT who surrendered to the government, also took a heavy toll on the CPT. Moreover, even after the Chinese stopped providing support, for ideological reasons the vast majority of the CPT still refused to realign themselves with Laos and Vietnam. Together, all these circumstances undoubtedly led to increased tensions within the CPT leadership and rank-and-file. By 1983, most of the CPT in northern Thailand had given up to the government. The liberated areas in Nan Province, including Khet #6, were dissolved, and Bee Sae Vang, Chue Khai Xiong, and Ko Yang led most of the soldiers and civilian population to surrender.10

However, one group of CPT, made up of over fifty soldiers, about seventy families, and approximately five-hundred people decided not to give up. Although led by Comrade Su, who was Hmong, most members of the group were ethnic Lawa (Lua). They relocated to a place called Na Mao, on the Thai–Lao border, and initially took refuge on the Lao side of the border. However, the CPT was still not welcomed by the Pathet Lao, due to their previous support for China, and so they were forced to cross back over to the Thai side of the border. They held out in the border area until 1990 when they finally decided to surrender.11

The Chao Fa

Another group that had a significant amount of interaction with the Thailand–Laos border in the Mae Charim District, Nan Province area was the Chao Fa Democratic Party, a messianic group made up of Hmong people, most of whom originally came from Laos and are followers of the religious beliefs of Shong Lue Yang, also known as the “mother of writing,” because he was said to have dreamt the alphabet of the Pahawb

10 Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim District, February 13, 2017.
11 Ibid.
This group, under the leadership of Zong Zoua Her in Laos and Pa Kao Her in Thailand, became one of the main insurgent groups fighting a guerrilla war against the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) government after 1975. The group was involved in fighting in the vicinity of the Phou Bia Mountains, the tallest peaks in Laos, after 1975, and later fought in Xayaboury Province in northern Laos, particularly in the Doi Yao Pha Mon area adjacent to Thailand’s Chiang Rai Province in the early 1980s, after receiving training and military backing by the People’s Republic of China beginning in 1979. They were based at Lao Oo Village, in the Phu Chee Fa area in Thoeng District. However, they relocated their operations to the border with Laos in Chiang Kham District, Phayao Province in the mid-1980s, and then to Mae Charim District, Nan Province in around 1988.

In 1988, the Chao Fa in Thailand, led by Pa Kao Her, established its base near the border with Laos in the remote forested mountains of Mae Charim District, with Thai military support, since the Thais still had poor relations with the communist Lao PDR government and wanted the anti-communist Chao Fa to destabilize Laos and also provide intelligence to the Thai military. The Chao Fa leadership set up their camp at Nam Kong. At that point, the CPT at Na Mao were being led by a number of people, including two Hmong men known by the revolutionary names of Comrade Su (Nhia Ja Sae Xiong) and Comrade Ka (Chong Pai Thao). According to Comrade Su, most of the under one thousand people Pa Kao Her had brought to Nam Kong came from Ban Vinai Refugee camp and had little military training. According to Yang Thao, the military leader of the Chao Fa, they started conducting raids inside Laos. Colonel Khamphanh was a Pathet Lao leader. The Chao Fa wanted to attack his unit, but because he was based inside Na Ven Village, an ethnic Lao village in Phiang District, Xayaboury Province, they had no choice but to attack them, which they did on October 31, 1988. The Chao Fa also became angry with the villagers because they threw a bomb from inside the village and injured two Chao Fa. Fighting continued for seven hours. In the end, 41 Pathet Lao soldiers, including Colonel Khamphanh, and some civilians were apparently killed, while only two Chao Fa were injured. The Chao Fa were reportedly able to obtain important intelligence documents for the Thai military, including telex messages. While Yang Thao felt that the Chao Fa were justified in what they did, Comrade Su thought that the Chao Fa would not be able to win over the hearts and

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14 Ian G. Baird, “Chao Fa Movies.”


16 Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.

17 Ibid.

18 Yang Thao, personal communications, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.
the minds of the people by being so brutal with civilians.\textsuperscript{19}

**Visions Clash – The CPT and the Chao Fa in Mae Charim**

When the Chao Fa realized that their base at Nam Kong was not far from the CPT base at Na Mao, they approached the CPT, first to negotiate an agreement not to commit any acts of violence against each other. Even though they subscribed to different political beliefs, they had both been previously supported by the China, although neither anymore, so they at least had that in common.\textsuperscript{20} In 1988, the two sides met and agreed not to shoot each other if they met in the forest. Pa Kao Her, Bijou Thao, and Yang Teng represented the Chao Fa, while Comrade Su, Comrade Chai, and Comrade Lawang represented the CPT. The verbal agreement from the two sides did not specify any borders between the two groups, so they could come to meet each other.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1989, about a year after the two groups first met, the Chao Fa decided to move their base about one kilometer from Na Mao, claiming it was easier to enter Laos from there than from Nam Kong. Soon after, according to Comrade Su, the Chao Fa reportedly devised a plan to recruit some of the Hmong people from the CPT group. To start with, Zong Chai Lo, Pa Kao Her’s deputy, asked Comrade Su and Comrade Chai to provide some military training to their soldiers. Initially, the two were hesitant, but because they were Hmong, just like the Chao Fa, they did not want to upset them. The CPT eventually hesitantly agreed but once they realized that many Chao Fa believed that spirits would protect them from bullets, through conducting a ritual that involved waving a regular wash cloth to prevent bullets from getting through, they became increasingly wary. Moreover, when seven Chao Fa showed up for training, they claimed that they could not lay down in battle because if even one of them did so all would end up being shot. The Chao Fa also burnt fake money in rituals after their soldiers went to battle. These kinds of beliefs went against standard military principles and the Maoist atheist orientation of the CPT. Therefore, Comrade Su and Comrade Chai felt that they could not train the Chao Fa and they discontinued the plan.\textsuperscript{22}

Not long after, the CPT decided to move their camp from Na Mao further south in order to get away from the Chao Fa. However, the Chao Fa again moved their base closer to the CPT base, leaving the CPT leaders unsure of what to do. The Chao Fa then asked the Hmong in the CPT group to join them. However, the CPT Hmong were not interested in the Chao Fa’s cause, which was to create a religiously inspired Hmong state, or federal system with a Hmong state. Therefore, when the Chao Fa proposed that the two groups join forces to establish a Hmong autonomous territory, or “Hmong state,” one which would straddle the border and include some territory in Thailand and some in Laos, the CPT leaders made it clear that they were not interested in pursuing such a goal. They were focused on Thailand as a country, not on establishing

\textsuperscript{19} Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.
\textsuperscript{21} Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

[33] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
an ethnic enclave. Their geographical imaginary was different. However, the Chao Fa prepared a written agreement in Thai that initially claimed that the CPT group was joining the Chao Fa. They proposed that the territory be from Nam Wa South and include all of Nam Phang Sub-district to Sop Mang, to which Comrade Su and other CPT leaders did not agree. They asked the Chao Fa to change the wording of the letter so that it was clear that they were not joining together. The Chao Fa leaders were not happy. Essentially, the CPT did not want to join with the Chao Fa.

According to Comrade Su, the Chao Fa remained determined to recruit from the CPT group, but realized that regular means would not work. Therefore, they were apparently determined to make the CPT angry with the Lao military so that the CPT would have a reason to join the Chao Fa. They decided to do this by attacking some of the CPT themselves and pretending that the attackers were from the Lao military. The first part of the plan involved three Chao Fa visiting Comrade Su’s swidden field. One of the three was a former CPT comrade in Phitsanulok Province. They stayed for three nights and pretended to be their friends. Soon after, Pa Kao Her reportedly ordered that the local Chao Fa-supporting families provide some rice to supply his soldiers during an upcoming mission into Laos. However, the rice was not consumed during a mission into Laos. Instead, it was used to feed Chao Fa soldiers sent to attack part of the CPT group in Mae Charim. The attack started at five in the morning when seven people, including women and children, were still sleeping in Comrade Su’s swidden house. There were seven attackers, all heavily armed. Comrade Su was not there. AK-47s were fired into the house, and a grenade was tossed through a window, killing Comrade Su’s youngest son, Daeng. A Hmong man named Lao Wang was shot as he ran ten meters outside the house with a pistol. A rocket-propelled grenade was fired at the house, destroying it. The children were able to flee, but one woman and one man were injured, and two males died. Those who escaped did not know who the attackers were.

The next day, after the dead were buried, Comrade Su went to Na Mao. The Chao Fa’s camp was located between the border and Comrade Su’s swidden field, and he asked Zong Chai Lo why the Lao soldiers did not attack his camp before coming to his swidden field, since it was closer to the border. Zong Chai Lo did not answer clearly, which made his suspicious. 

According to Comrade Su, Ka Chue Chang, who was the commander of the northern Chao Fa soldiers. According to Comrade Su, Ka Chue asked Comrade Su why he did not shoot the Lao soldiers who killed his son. Comrade Su immediately thought that Ka Chue was lying and that the Chao Fa were actually behind the attack that killed his son. Comrade Su did not say or do anything immediately, as he was demoralized, but just a couple of days later he and his followers decided to nego-

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 According to Yang Thao (personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018), the Chao Fa were actually located inside Laos, although Comrade Su believes that they were located inside Thailand (personal communication, Nam Tuang Village., Mae Charim, February 13, 2017). In any case, they were very close to the border.
26 Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, June 19, 2018.
27 Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.
tiate to surrender.\textsuperscript{28} Yang Thao admits to meeting with Comrade Su and other CPT in Mae Charim, and for attacking Na Ven Village in 1988, but probably not surprisingly, he denies that the Chao Fa attacked the swidden house of Comrade Su.\textsuperscript{29}

In any case, both agree that from 1992 to 1993, the Pathet Lao communist military determined that the force that had attacked Na Ven Village was located in Mae Charim and attacked the Chao Fa base, causing considerable casualties, including the deaths of Bijou Thao and Ka Chue Chang (stepped on a landmine in 1992) and forced the Chao Fa to dissipate and relocate. Many followers of the Chao Fa fled to various Thai Hmong villages.\textsuperscript{30} The Thai military also reported that it was no longer supporting the Lao insurgency, including presumably the Chao Fa, beginning in 1990.\textsuperscript{31} Yang Thao, the military commander of the Chao Fa, claimed that he left Mae Charim in 1994, and he came to the United States in the early 2000s after the Chao Fa leader, Pa Kao Her, was assassinated in Chiang Rai Province.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Conclusions}

This story illustrates how people from the same ethnic group, and who spoke the same language, came into contact with each other along the Thailand-Laos border on the Thai side of the border in Mae Charim District, Nan Province. Despite being ethnically and linguistically close, the two sides were quite different politically. The CPT Hmong were Maoists with a strong communist political orientation. They viewed the border as a place where they could be protected in the mountains, but unlike the Chao Fa who were interested in Lao politics, they were only interested in Thai politics, and were thus quite nationally oriented. There were still some tensions between the CPT and the Lao government, due to past politics, but the CPT did not have any political objectives related to Laos. Neither did they desire to create any sort of Hmong state. Today, the former CPT Hmong live in official villages in the same general area of Thailand along the Lao border, where they are now officially known as “Phu Ruam Patthana Prathet Thai” (those who join together to develop Thailand) and are fully recognized by the Thai government.

The Chao Fa, on the other hand, were not communist-oriented, even though they received Chinese military support to fight against Laos between 1979 and the mid-1980s. Instead, they were self-styled “freedom fighters” inspired by messianic beliefs with the goal of establishing a Hmong state or Hmong autonomous area.\textsuperscript{33} Therefore, they saw the border in a very different way than the Hmong CPT. They wanted to fight against the communist government in Laos in particular, and they were interested in establishing a Hmong autonomous area on both sides of the border, which fit with

\textsuperscript{28} Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.
\textsuperscript{29} Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.
\textsuperscript{30} Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017; Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.
\textsuperscript{32} Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, Minnesota, July 3, 2017.
\textsuperscript{33} Baird, “Chao Fa Movies.”
their religious and political beliefs. The Chao Fa are no longer in Mae Charim. Many have died. Some live elsewhere in Thailand and some have made it to the United States as political refugees. The relationship between the former CPT in Mae Charim and the Thai and Lao PDR governments have dramatically improved. They live in the border area peacefully and interact with the governments on both sides of the border without any notable problems. Indeed, the circumstances have shifted dramatically since the late 1980s.

Thus, the point of this short essay is to demonstrate that even peoples from the same ethnic minority groups such as the Hmong, who have similar linguistic and cultural characteristics, may end up viewing particular borders, even the exact same ones, in very different ways, due to major differences in political orientations and objectives.

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Lhamo Thondup was just two years old when he was recognized as the reincarnation of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The Great Thirteenth, as he is popularly known, had died in Lhasa in 1933 at the age of fifty-eight. The team charged with finding his new incarnation was composed of leading lamas from monasteries in Tibet, and some were eminent reincarnations themselves. Clues and omens unique to Tibetan Buddhism—some provided by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama himself—guided their search. The Dalai Lama had intimated that his reincarnation would be found in the east. Thus, when the head of the embalmed Great Thirteenth was discovered to have turned overnight from facing south to pointing northeast, the search team was certain which direction their journey should take. When the regent in charge of the search visited the sacred Lhamo Lhatso Lake and gazed into its deep blue waters, the characters for “Ah,” “Ka,” and “Ma” appeared, and he saw a hilltop monastery with a golden roof and an ordinary farmer’s house with strangely configured gutters.

The “Ah” led the search team to the Amdo region of eastern Tibet, then governed by the Hui (Muslim) warlord Ma Bufang as Qinghai, as the region is known in Chinese. The “Ka” and the vision of a monastery led them to Amdo’s Kumbum monastery, one of Tibetan Buddhism’s leading seats of religious learning, built by the founder of the Gelugpa, or Yellow Hat, school of Buddhism to which all Dalai Lamas have belonged. From Kumbum monastery the search team was led to Taktser village and the house with strange gutters, where they met Lhamo Thondup. When the little boy correctly chose from an assorted selection of articles only those previously owned and used by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, the search committee knew that the new Dalai Lama had been found.
On 6 July of this year, millions of Tibetans around the world celebrated the eighty-second birthday of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, the man most refer to simply as “His Holiness.” For Tibetans in exile, the celebrations were held openly and without fear, with religious ceremonies, song and dance performances, and holiday meals. For followers inside China, where even photographs of the Dalai Lama may be forbidden, recognitions of the occasion were surreptitious and discreet—an extra offering on the altar where the family’s protective Buddhist statues stand guard, perhaps. While the Dalai Lama’s health continues to be remarkably good, and he believes that he could live to well past one hundred years, anxieties about the future of the Dalai Lama as both a man and an institution are rife. The Chinese government on the one hand and the Dalai Lama and his followers on the other are at apparently irreconcilable odds over what the future of the Dalai Lama will be.

The first and most fundamental question is whether the tradition of reincarnation will continue upon this Dalai Lama’s death—whether the current Dalai Lama will be followed by a new, Fifteenth Dalai Lama. If this Dalai Lama is to be reincarnated, the question is how and by whom the choice will be made. Most vexing of all perhaps is the issue of where the next Dalai Lama might be found. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has lived in Dharamsala, India since 1959 when he and a devoted entourage of bodyguards and fighters fled by night after long simmering popular anger against the Chinese in Lhasa had led to a massive, spontaneous protest that the Dalai Lama and his government were powerless to stop. Despite years of discussions, the Chinese government has still not allowed the Dalai Lama to return home.

From the official Chinese perspective, only the central government of China can decide whether the institution of the Dalai Lama can survive or end. That decision seems already to have been made. There will be a Fifteenth Dalai Lama, and the Chinese government will choose him. Any candidate put forward directly by the Dalai Lama would be declared illegal. The process by which the Chinese would make the choice has yet to be fully articulated, but some clues are provided in the guidelines drawn up by the State Religious Affairs Bureau in 2007 for the process of choosing reincarnations of Tibetan “living Buddhas.” Buddhist Associations and management committees within key monasteries in China are likely to guide the search, and final approval would rest with the State Council, the country’s highest level of government power. The process would likely include the process used (apparently only twice) during the Manchu dynasty, of pulling a slip of paper from a golden urn containing the names of the several final candidates. The rules leave little doubt that the next Dalai Lama will be found in China. They specify that no foreign individual or institution can be involved in the process. The Dalai Lama is equally clear that only he has the right to decide whether he will be

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reincarnated, how the choice would be made, and where he might be found. But the Dalai Lama has yet to decide whether he actually will reincarnate, and recent public statements have aroused speculation that he may not. In conversations with Indian author Pankaj Mishra, the Dalai Lama seemed to call for the end of the institution, describing it as outdated and backward. In an interview with the BBC, he similarly suggested that the time may have come for the tradition to end while there is still a popular Dalai Lama. “There is no guarantee that some stupid Dalai Lama won’t come next,” he said, “Someone who will disgrace himself or herself. That would be very sad. So much better that a centuries old tradition should cease at the time of a quite popular Dalai Lama.”

Despite his public and possibly whimsical musings, a document promulgated by the Dalai Lama in September 2011 remains his only official statement on his future. While the document makes clear that he has still not decided on whether to reincarnate, the process through which that decision will be made is spelled out. The decision will be made when the Dalai Lama is “about ninety” (which will be in 2025) and will be based on his consultations with “the high Lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Tibetan public, and other concerned people who follow Tibetan Buddhism.” He also explains that if a new incarnation is to be chosen, the responsibility would rest with his own personal office and be based on his own written instructions. The Dalai Lama also declared that any candidate chosen for political ends or by the People’s Republic of China would be considered illegitimate.

If the Dalai Lama’s decision about whether to reincarnate really rests with the Tibetan lamas, the Tibetan public, and other followers of Tibetan Buddhism, the outcome of his consultations seems a foregone conclusion. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama is one of the most revered, popular, and beloved of those who have gone before him, and his proposed consultations will be with those who know him best and revere him the most. On a visit to Dharamsala not long ago, when I asked a young Tibetan woman what she thought might happen when the Dalai Lama leaves this world, she burst into tears. Minutes passed before she could compose herself. Her answer, when it came, echoed those of others with whom I had raised the question. “He is everything to me,” she said. “I’m afraid I could not live without him.”

Indeed, some Tibetans living inside China have proved that they literally cannot live without the Dalai Lama. Since widespread protests against Chinese rule swept the Tibetan plateau in 2008, 150 Tibetans, the majority of them young men, have set themselves on fire, whether in protest or despair. To the extent that individual cases are

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known, most died shouting the Dalai Lama’s name and calling for his return to Tibet. While public opinion in Tibetan China is hard to gauge, everything we know suggests that the Dalai Lama continues to be revered. A world without a Dalai Lama is almost inconceivable to Tibetan Buddhists. Of course they would want a reincarnation.

Some, worried about the long interregnum between the discovery of a new Dalai Lama and his assumption of the office upon reaching majority, are calling for a rethinking about how the next Dalai Lama might be chosen. The interregnum, traditionally and almost inevitably, has been rife with political discord. Not only is endless jockeying for power among the people surrounding the immature Dalai Lama almost unavoidable, the regents charged with governing in the interim have sometimes been reluctant to cede power themselves. Several Dalai Lamas have been done away with before reaching majority, and others have died shortly after ascending the throne.

Some Tibetans in exile have begun discussing alternative methods—still Tibetan Buddhist in nature—that do not require the current incarnation to die before the new one is chosen. One method is through “selection,” a relatively straightforward process of convening a meeting of high lamas to choose the next Dalai Lama while the current one is still alive. The other is through a process of “emanation,” whereby the current, living incarnation “manifests” himself in another person, whether because that person has already reached a sufficiently high stage of spirituality and learning or because that person is deemed by strength of character to be worthy of being chosen as the Dalai Lama’s disciple and hence trained as his successor. In this case, the Dalai Lama himself designates his own successor. Reincarnation by selection or manifestation both have the advantage of ensuring that the choice is incontrovertibly that of the living Dalai Lama and his highest spiritual advisors and would therefore be non-contentious, at least within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhist believers. The Dalai Lama himself is open to both of these methods. He mentions them in his official statement on reincarnation.

But whatever method is finally decided for the choice of the next Dalai Lama, a serious hurdle remains: Where is the next Dalai Lama to be found? Previous reincarnations have been found only in Tibet, China, and Mongolia. Without a new agreement between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama, China and Tibet (because Tibet is now part of China) are not realistic possibilities.

Mongolia is one possibility. The ties between Mongolia and Tibetan Buddhism are long and deep. It was the Mongolian Altan Khan who bestowed the title of Dalai Lama, meaning Ocean of Wisdom, upon the head of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism during his visit to Mongolia in 1577, after which he declared Buddhism the official religion of Mongolia. The Fourth Dalai Lama was from Mongolia. Buddhism remains the predominant religion, and the current Dalai Lama has made several visits, enthusiastically welcomed by tens of thousands of followers and fueling speculation and hope that the next Dalai Lama might be Mongolian.

China’s strong protests against the Dalai Lama’s trip to Mongolia last November put a damper on that possibility. The visit took place at the invitation of one of Mongolia’s
leading Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and hence was not governmental, but China objected nonetheless. When the Chinese canceled meetings with Mongolian officials about a badly needed loan and imposed new transport fees that tied up truck traffic at the China-Mongolia border for days in sub-zero weather, the Mongolian foreign minister assured China that the Dalai Lama would not be invited again.\(^6\)

China's growing power and assertiveness, its insistence that the Dalai Lama is a “split-tist” seeking independence for Tibet, its reluctance to distinguish between church and state, and its willingness to engage in economic punishment against countries that do not bow to its dictates have compelled several countries to cave into China's protests against visits by the Dalai Lama. While the Dalai Lama is still welcomed in the United States and many countries in Europe and Asia, Chinese protests are becoming louder. India, which has provided him sanctuary for nearly sixty years, is the one country where his welcome continues to expand.

But the Chinese government has recently also protested one of the Dalai Lama's visits in India.

Indian maps show the mountain town of Tawang as a tiny speck just east of the far northeastern border of Bhutan and just south of the border with Tibet. A line starting from the Tibetan capital of Lhasa going due south and just slightly east would pass through Tawang. Until the early twentieth century, Tawang was part of Tibet, and its small population is composed of both Tibetans and members of the Monpa tribe. Both practice Tibetan Buddhism. The Sixth Dalai Lama was born there.

In 1914, as a result of the Simla Convention, the border between India and Tibet shifted southward, putting Tawang just inside the Indian border in the state of what is now Arunachal Pradesh. The line of demarcation came to be known as the McMahon line and has been contested ever since. The Chinese never signed or recognized the Simla Accords and continue to regard the territory as theirs. When the Dalai Lama's older brother, Gyalpo Thondup, passed through in early 1952, the residents greeted him with enthusiasm, showering him with eggs, cheese, and meat. They thought he had come to reclaim Tawang for Tibet.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama first visited Tawang in March 1959, after his two-week flight from Lhasa. It was there, he says, that he first felt freedom. He spent several days resting in its magnificent ancient monastery, built by the Fifth Dalai Lama, and recuperating from the arduous journey that had left him sick and exhausted. Jawaharlal Nehru granted him asylum, and the Dalai Lama announced the formation of a new government in exile and publicly renounced the Seventeen-Point Agreement that had been signed between China and Tibet in 1951, ceding sovereignty over Tibet to China while promising a high degree of autonomy.

In April 2017, the Dalai Lama was once more warmly welcomed in Tawang, and many
he met during his visit expressed their dream that the next Dalai Lama would be born
there. Some saw this visit as a possible scouting expedition. Indeed, with so many
other possibilities so clearly closed off, India is an obvious place for a reincarnation
to appear. Tawang, with its long history of Tibetan Buddhism, seems an ideal choice.

But Chinese protests against the Dalai Lama’s recent visit to Tawang had begun even
while he was still en route. Arunachal Pradesh had been a Chinese target early in the
1962 Sino-Indian War, though most of the actual fighting took place in Aksai Chin,
another disputed border area. The dispute has remained dormant for years, but China
still claims both Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as its own. Whereas Deng Xiao-
qing once offered to forgo China’s claim to Arunachal Pradesh if India conceded Aksai
Chin, now China is offering India Aksai Chin in return for just the small northern part
of Arunachal Pradesh that contains Tawang. China–India relations are entering a new
phase of tension. The Chinese have accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of taking
a “different”—meaning more favorable—stance on the Dalai Lama issue and warned
him against underestimating Beijing’s determination to protect its core interests.

Without major concessions, the likelihood is that there will be two Dalai Lamas, one
chosen by the Chinese government and one selected according to the Dalai Lama’s
own instructions—one “official” Dalai Lama and one of the heart, as the Dalai Lama
describes the possibility. Wherever the new Dalai Lama may be found, and however
he may be selected, only the choice of the Dalai Lama will be legitimate, at least from
the perspective of Tibetan Buddhists and all who believe in the freedom of religious
belief and the separation of church and state. That legitimacy would only be enhanced
if the new Dalai Lama were to be chosen by the method of selection or manifestation.

The possible legitimacy of the Chinese choice will be disadvantaged by the Chinese
government’s own lack of religious belief and its reliance on “established systems” of
Tibetan Buddhism tracing back to the Qing dynasty, a period otherwise labeled by the
Chinese government as “feudal.” The party favors the process of reincarnation because
it provides the opportunity for years of government schooling to instill “correct” values
in the would-be Dalai Lama. Several past Chinese lama selections have gone badly
wrong. The Tenth Panchen Lama, raised under the Chinese, wrote what must still
stand as the most thorough and damning evidence-based critique of Communist Party
rule written by a Chinese insider, for which the Panchen Lama spent years in prison.

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7 Ellen Barry, “Dalai Lama’s Journey Provokes China, and Hints at His Heir,” New York Times,
8 Ananth Krishnan, “China ready to go a deal with India for concessions in Tawang?,” India To-
9 “Unlike predecessors, Modi’s stance different on Dalai Lama issue: China,” Times
April 2018).
More recently, both the Arjia Rinpoche from Kumbum monastery and the Karmapa Lama, who stands third in the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, were raised under the party’s watchful eye only to escape—the Arjia Rinpoche to the United States and the Karmapa Lama to India, outside Dharamsala.

The Tibetan government in exile is currently in a period of soul-searching about the fate of Tibet and Tibetans, focusing most intensely on what may be possible over the next fifty years. Optimistic predictions in this time of growing Chinese assertiveness in the world and intransigence with respect to the question of Tibet do not come easily. But in the long run, measured in centuries rather than decades, it is hard to believe that Tibetan Buddhism will not prevail. Tibetan Buddhism has already outlasted four dynasties and the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek. History suggests that authoritarian governments eventually fail while religion survives. Tibetan Buddhism has a good chance of outliving the People’s Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party but only if the institution of the Dalai Lama survives. Tibetan Buddhism needs a spiritual leader. Tibetan Buddhists need their spiritual guide. The institution is most likely to survive with a change in how the Dalai Lama is chosen. The alternatives are already on the Buddhist record and regarded as legitimate. Lobsang Sangay, the Harvard-educated, second-term prime minister of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala elected after the Dalai Lama withdrew from his political role, supports the method of emanation and hopes the decision will come soon. Many Tibetans hope that the Dalai Lama will not wait until he is ninety to decide. When I broached the subject with the Karmapa Lama a couple years ago, he too, said he hopes the Dalai Lama will make his decision soon.

That time, I hope, is near.

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Front cover photo: The Joint Security Area separating North and South Korea along the 38th parallel (Caroline Yarber).