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BOOK REVIEW

State Building in Cold War Asia: Comrades and Competitors on the Sino-Vietnamese Border

By Qingfei Yin

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Yin Qingfei's *State Building in Cold War Asia: Comrades and Competitors on the Sino-Vietnamese Border* is that makes a significant contribution to the study of twentieth-century China-Vietnam relations, Cold War studies, and borderland studies. Drawing on extensive Chinese and Vietnamese archival sources, it reconceptualises the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (1949–1975) as dynamic sites of state formation, where central authorities, local actors, and transnational networks continuously negotiated power.

By foregrounding the borderlands as spaces of both ideological experimentation and administrative contestation, the book sheds new light on how the Chinese state navigated local realities and transnational entanglements in the socialist era. It invites scholars of modern China to engage with borderland perspectives and to reconsider the limits, variability, and contingency of Mao-era state power. Although the book has already attracted scholarly attention, the discussion that follows is informed by my research interests in Sino-Burmese relations and China's inland provinces. It offers an overview of the book's central arguments, followed by a selective critical discussion of aspects most relevant to my research concerns.

The early phase of state-building at the Sino-Vietnamese border was marked by a fundamental asymmetry in how the two regimes understood and utilised the frontier (p. 34). Chapter 1, "Asymmetric State Building (1949–1954)," shows that this divergence was not only a matter of uneven state capacity, but also of differing strategic priorities. For the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the border functioned as a crucial resource, enabling access to Chinese aid and supporting revolutionary warfare during the First Indochina War (1946–1954) (p. 40). By contrast, leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) approached the Guangxi-Vietnam border primarily through a security lens, treating it as a vulnerable frontier where external threats and internal instability might converge (p. 40). This contrast reflects a broader distinction between a revolutionary state seeking expansion and survival, and a consolidating state focused on territorial control and internal stability.

This asymmetry gradually gave way to a more coordinated phase of state intervention during the 1950s. Chapter 2, "Joint State-Building (1954–1957)," demonstrates how the PRC and the DRV sought to regulate mobility, restructure trade, and consolidate authority within a shared socialist and Cold War framework. These efforts included the institutionalisation of border policing (p. 85), the repair and integration of railway systems linking China and Vietnam (p. 89), the tightening of social controls along transport routes (p. 92), and the marginalisation of spontaneous cross-border trade (p. 93). The two states tried to build an inward-oriented, socialist society on their respective sides while preventing permitted cross-border movements from hindering their carefully forged communist partnership (p. 116). Despite this apparent alignment, the implementation of policy revealed significant constraints. State authority remained limited by local conditions, administrative fragmentation, and the resilience of long-standing cross-border networks, including marriage ties and cross-border farming practices. Rather than passively accepting these interventions, border communities

adapted to, negotiated with, and at times circumvented official policies. As a result, state expansion did not proceed smoothly but instead unfolded as an uneven and contested process of early socialist state formation.

Chapter 3, “Negotiated State Building (1958–1964),” investigates the coercive measures adopted by the two states to extract resources from the border, as well as the strategies employed by border populations to resist state encroachment of the porous international boundary, at times even “voting with their feet” to seek better conditions across the border (p. 34, 150). Under these conditions, border populations increasingly relied on cross-border mobility and informal networks to sustain their livelihoods, compelling local officials to adopt more pragmatic and flexible approaches. “Negotiation” thus emerges not simply as a governing strategy, but as a structural condition of rule, highlighting the fragility and contingency of state authority at the frontier. In the Chinese case, the mass migration of border villagers into Vietnam during the Great Leap Forward risked undermining the PRC’s self-image as a model and mentor of socialism (p. 156). At the same time, the “backfiring of Vietnamese land reform,” discussed earlier, contributed to growing doubts among leaders of the Workers Party of Vietnam about the applicability of “the Maoist revolutionary model.” (p. 115) These tensions, combined with ongoing border disputes, later fed into the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations, eventually providing part of the justification for China’s punitive invasion of northern Vietnam during the Third Indochina War (1975–1991).

This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when the analysis turns to the maritime frontier of the Gulf of Tonkin. Chapter 4, “Thwarted State Building on the Sea (1954–1964),” examines coastal state-building efforts, showing that attempts to extend state control encountered stronger resistance as coastal societies operated according to fundamentally different economic and social logics. The chapter demonstrates that tensions between internationalist, nationalist, and transnational local agendas were more acute at the maritime border than on land (p. 34). High mobility, dense transnational networks, and dependence on open maritime resources rendered agrarian-based policies such as collectivisation and centralised regulation largely ineffective. Efforts to impose these models often led to economic disruption and social discontent, forcing local officials to adapt state directives.

From 1965, with the escalation of the Second Indochina War (commonly known as the Vietnam War) against the United States the trajectory of state-building. Chapter 5, “Reversed State Building (1965–1975),” explores this dynamic in detail. On the one hand, the border region was drawn into global Cold War dynamics, leading to extensive infrastructure development, intensified military cooperation, and large-scale mobilisation of local populations, which expanded the state’s physical and strategic presence. On the other hand, the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution (p. 215, 222–24) and the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations (p. 205) weakened administrative coherence and strained local

governance (p. 227). As a result, both states struggled to maintain consistent control, and previously suppressed cross-border interactions re-emerged as practical necessities (p. 237, 239, 241). While Yin characterises these joint state-building efforts as having been “aborted,” the evidence also suggests a more complex dynamic in which state authority was simultaneously expanded and undermined.

Building on these empirical chapters, Yin’s conclusion highlights the broader theoretical significance of the study. By tracing the “wax and wane of state power” at the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (p. 248), the book demonstrates how state-building in frontier regions was neither linear nor coherent but deeply shaped by the interaction between geopolitical conflict and local social dynamics. Yin’s concept of “joint state invasion” is particularly innovative, capturing both the vertical expansion of centralised authority and the horizontal collaboration between corresponding Chinese and Vietnamese institutions across the border (p. 253). At the same time, the book underscores the persistence of “transnational localism” (p. 7), as cross-border networks resurfaced whenever state capacity weakened, revealing the limits of attempts to impose a “hard boundary” on what had long functioned as a “soft boundary” (pp. 253–54). In this sense, the book makes an important contribution by bringing the state back into borderlands studies without reducing border societies to passive recipients of state power. More broadly, Yin argues that the Cold War should be understood not only as a geopolitical confrontation, but as a “social mechanism” that reshaped local societies and state practices across Asia (p. 257).

While Yin’s theoretically ambitious framework is one of the book’s major strengths, the organisation of the chapters around a series of conceptual labels, such as “asymmetric,” “joint,” “negotiated,” and “reversed” state-building, can at times give the impression that the analysis is guided more by a conceptual scheme than by the organic unfolding of historical processes. In addition, the placement of the maritime chapter 4, which overlaps chronologically with earlier sections, introduces a slight structural discontinuity, suggesting a thematic insertion rather than a fully integrated component of the overall narrative. These concerns, however, are minor when set against the scale of the book, the breadth of its empirical material, and the complexity of the issues it addresses.

As a historian of Mao-era China, with a particular focus on social and political history and on political campaigns examined from a bottom-up, micro-level perspective, I find that Yin’s book offers valuable inspiration for rethinking both Sino-Burmese interactions and borderland studies more broadly. Rather than suggesting direct parallels, Yin’s analysis provides a useful lens for examining the dynamics of state-building and local agency in frontier regions. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Sino-Burmese frontier during the period when the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) controlled parts of northern Burma, where it established county-level administrative structures, implemented land reform, and imposed taxation, including attempts to regulate long-standing practices such as the opium

trade, smuggling, and local market exchange. In this context, the book encourages a more nuanced understanding of how state power interacted with pre-existing social and economic networks.

At the level of political mobilisation and borderland instability, Yin's discussion of the Cultural Revolution further illustrates how such dynamics unfolded in practice. She shows how political radicalism spilled over into the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, intensifying tensions between local communities and state authorities while exposing the vulnerability of individuals engaged in cross-border activities. These insights also help illuminate developments along the Sino-Burmese frontier, where, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of Chinese Red Guards (sent-down youths) crossed into Burma to join the CPB's armed struggle. Unlike the more explicitly discouraged attempts by Red Guards to enter Vietnam (pp. 201–02), Chinese authorities did not openly prohibit such movements into Burma, nor did they formally endorse them. Instead, they adopted an ambiguous stance of tacit tolerance. This ambiguity had long-term consequences, as many of these individuals, upon returning to China, faced prolonged processes of negotiation with state authorities to have their status recognised and regularised.

At the level of everyday practice and social survival, Yin highlights how borderland populations relied on cross-border mobility to navigate periods of political upheaval and economic hardship. The book documents cross-border marriages, informal economic networks, and the movement of refugees who fled to escape political campaigns or to survive the Great Leap Forward famine (p. 114). Along the Guangdong-Hong Kong border, for instance, the famine years witnessed the first major wave of Cantonese migration to Hong Kong since 1949 (p. 150), underscoring the role of border crossing as a survival strategy. These practices also resonate with a longstanding ethical principle expressed in the traditional saying *jun bu zheng; chen tou waiguo; fu bu zheng, zi ben taxiang* 君不正,臣投外國;父不正,子奔他鄉 ("When a ruler is unjust, his ministers may seek service under another ruler; when a father is unrighteous, his sons may leave home"). The saying articulates a broader moral logic that those subjected to unjust authority may legitimately leave in search of protection elsewhere. According to Gao Wangling 高王凌, archival records from Hunan document peasants fleeing during the Great Leap Forward invoking this saying to legitimise their departure (Gao 2011). Similar patterns can be observed along the Sino-Burmese and even Sino-Soviet frontiers, where cross-border movement provided refuge for individuals fleeing famine and political turmoil. By tracing these movements, Yin demonstrates that borderlands functioned not merely as sites of state control but also as spaces of circulation, refuge, and adaptive survival beyond the full reach of the state authority.

Beyond highlighting the importance of mobility, Yin offers a rich and nuanced account of how local actors mediated and reshaped the implementation of socialist state-building projects. Fishers, farmers, traders, migrants, and grassroots cadres did not simply submit to

state policies such as land reform, agricultural collectivisation, or the radical campaigns of the Cultural Revolution. Rather, they developed a wide range of strategies to negotiate, adapt to, and at times evade state intervention. Particularly significant is Yin's attention to grassroots cadres, who occupied an intermediary position between central directives and local society, and whose practices often mediated, softened, or selectively implemented state policies on the ground. These dynamics were not unique to border regions. They resonate strongly with situations in inland China, especially those identified by Gao Wangling, who characterises such peasant behaviour as *fan xingwei* 反行為 ("counteractive practices"), referring to everyday practices that subtly resisted or reworked state directives. In both contexts, local actors were neither fully subordinate to nor entirely outside state structures; rather, they capitalised on the gaps between state aspiration and social realities. These dynamics can also be understood through the lens of James Scott's (1985) notion of "weapons of the weak", highlighting how everyday forms of negotiation, evasion and adaptation that shaped the practical limits of state power. In this sense, although Yin frames the book as a project that "reemphasises the role of the state" in borderland studies (p. 7), her analysis simultaneously demonstrates that state power was always contingent, mediated, and refracted through local practices. By bridging borderland history with studies of inland China, the book ultimately reveals that the reach of the socialist state was never absolute but continually reshaped by the very actors it sought to govern.

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