

FRONTIER ASSEMBLAGES

The Emergent Politics of Resource
Frontiers in Asia

Edited by
Jason Cons
Michael Eilenberg



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Frontier Assemblages

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Frontier Assemblages

*The Emergent Politics of Resource
Frontiers in Asia*

Edited by

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This edition first published 2019
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John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Office

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data applied for

ISBN: 9781119412069 (hardback)

ISBN: 9781119412052 (paperback)

Cover image: Frontier infrastructure, newly asphalted road crossing a bridge into forest interior of West Kalimantan, Indonesia © Michael Eilenberg

Cover design by Wiley

Set in 10.5/12.5pt Sabon by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Series Editors' Preface

The *Antipode Book Series* explores radical geography 'antipodally', in opposition, from various margins, limits, or borderlands.

Antipode books provide insight 'from elsewhere', across boundaries rarely transgressed, with internationalist ambition and located insight; they diagnose grounded critique emerging from particular contradictory social relations in order to sharpen the stakes and broaden public awareness. An *Antipode* book might revise scholarly debates by pushing at disciplinary boundaries, or by showing what happens to a problem as it moves or changes. It might investigate entanglements of power and struggle in particular sites, but with lessons that travel with surprising echoes elsewhere.

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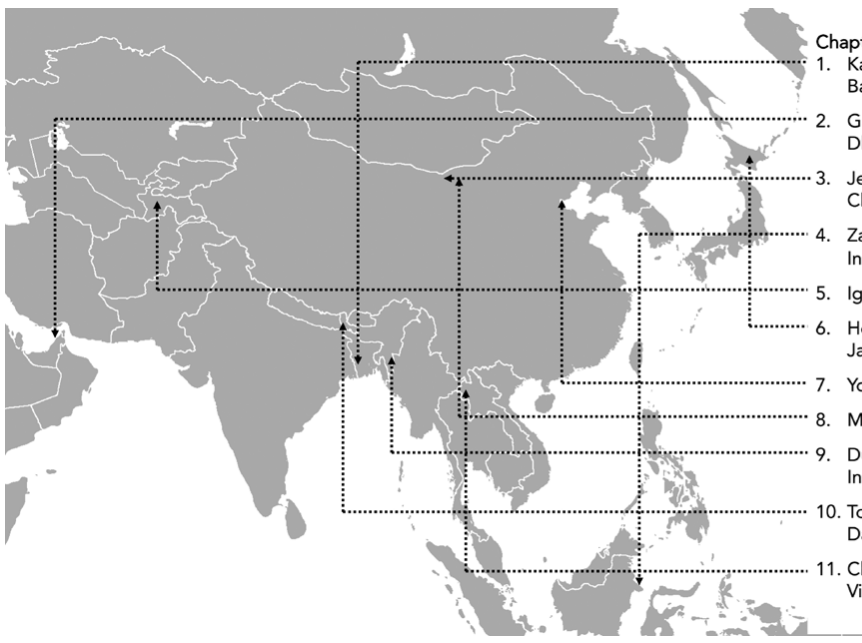
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Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank all the authors for their enthusiasm, active engagement with, and support of this project. We would like, especially, to thank the authors of the commentaries – Christian Lund, Nancy Lee Peluso, K. Sivaramakrishnan, and Prasenjit Duara—for their time and thoughtful and generous readings of these chapters. The majority of the contributors to this project first met in late April 2016 as part of the Frontier Assemblages workshop (convened by Cons and Eilenberg) at the Social Science Research Council’s InterAsian Connections V conference in Seoul. This workshop served as a launching point for this volume and a generative moment for many of the ideas expressed in it. We would like to thank the SSRC’s InterAsia Program – especially Seteney Shami, Holly Danzeisen, and Mona Saghri – for providing intellectual guidance and financial support, and the Seoul National University Asia Center for their hospitality in hosting us and this event. Their support made it possible to assemble such a vibrant group of scholars working on frontiers across Asia. Prasenjit Duara, Sahana Ghosh, Angela Ki-che Leung, and K. Sivaramakrishnan provided valuable questions and commentary during the workshop. Of the original participants, Mike Dwyer, Dolly Kikon, and Jasnea Sarma have not included essays in this volume. We thank them for participating in the workshop and providing support and encouragement to the project. A longer and substantially different version of Chapter 1 was published in *Antipode* Volume 51, Issue 1.

We would like to thank Lloyd Farley for his work in assembling the bibliography for this book. We received supportive and constructive feedback on the introduction from Emmy Dawson, Sabrina Lilleby Duncan McDuie-Ra, Townsend Middleton, Daniel Ng, Kenza Yousfi,

and Stephen Zigmund. Erin Lentz, Vasilina Orlova, and James Slotta, provided feedback on earlier iterations of this project. We received invaluable feedback on the manuscript as a whole from two anonymous reviewers. Finally, we wish to thank Jacqueline Scott at Wiley and Vinay Gidwani and Sharad Chari of the Antipode Book Series for their support of this project and their work in bringing it to publication.



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Introduction

On the New Politics of Margins in Asia

Mapping Frontier Assemblages

Jason Cons and Michael Eilenberg

How shall the inhabitants of a 'remote area' evaluate the arbitrary love-hate of its visitors? Are alternative periods of 'unspoiledness' and violence their inevitable fate? – Edwin Ardener

This volume responds to the emergence, and we argue convergence, of two phenomena across Asia over the past handful of decades. The first is the rapid transformation of forest and agrarian spaces into sites of export-oriented resource extraction. Whether in the conversion of vast swaths of rainforest to oil palm and rubber plantations across Southeast Asia or the explosion of large-scale and wildcat mining operations around the Pacific rim, millions of acres of land have been rapidly converted into sites for often ecologically and socially destructive extraction.¹ The causes of this expansion are various, but broadly they have been stimulated by the search for new investment opportunities by transnational companies, both beyond but especially within Asia, and a boom in transnational investments and development collaborations anchored in global supply chains (Hall, 2011; Borrás and Franco, 2011; Buchanan et al., 2013; Baird, 2014; Li, 2014b; Kelly and Peluso, 2015; Li, 2015). Alongside this unprecedented expansion have been a myriad of other transformations of remote space into new kinds of productive sites – sites slated for massive infrastructural projects, export processing zones, new urban developments, spaces of privatized health care, habitats of ecological reclamation and sustainability, speculative locations for carbon storage and more. The proposition of this volume is that these two

Frontier Assemblages: The Emergent Politics of Resource Frontiers in Asia,
First Edition. Edited by Jason Cons and Michael Eilenberg.

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processes of extraction and production should be understood together as linked projects of incorporating margins and remote areas into new territorial formations. In other words, these out-of-the-way places (Tsing, 1993) are key sites in the making of, and thus key vantage points for understanding, new articulations of territorial rule, regional and global networks of accumulation, and security.² We argue that both these productive and extractive transformations should be understood as the making of new Asian resource frontiers.

Studies of resource frontiers have primarily explored extractive spaces – areas where monocultural crop booms or the discovery of new mineral or petrochemical resources have rapidly reconfigured land tenure and sociality alongside of political economy and ecology (Sturgeon, 2005; McCarthy, 2006; De Koninck et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2011). In this volume, we move away from an exclusive focus on extraction, and understand resource frontiers also as sites of creative, if often ruinous, production. In doing so, we offer two rejoinders to the more well-trodden literature on the political economy of extraction. First, we suggest that what matters in the incorporation (or re-incorporation) of margins are the various forces and processes that are assembled to reinvent these spaces as zones of opportunity. And second, we suggest that not only are these forces of spatial transformation resonant across sites, resources, and interventions, but that a broader view of territorial intervention gives us tools to understand a moment in which the relationship of millions of people to land and rule is being radically reconfigured. Moreover, we suggest that at once plumbing the unique histories of individual frontiers and understanding similarities across different frontiers might open new possibilities for responding to exploitation.

How might we understand the forces that precipitate these sweeping transformations throughout the region? And what do these shifts portend for Asia's margins, many of which have and continue to be sites of intense securitization, instability, conflict, and expansion? What similarities and differences do these transformations share? This volume ventures a series of initial studies of these questions. Each chapter offers a rich ethnographic and/or historical study of a particular resource frontier. Yet collectively, we begin to trace broader patterns of contemporary frontier making and their effects.

To do this, we turn our attention to what we call *frontier assemblages*: the intertwined materialities, actors, cultural logics, spatial dynamics, ecologies, and political economic processes that produce particular places as resource frontiers. Frontier assemblage is a term that is both descriptive and analytic. Contributors to this volume use it to map the histories and geographies that coalesce in specific places and moments to produce resource frontiers. At the same time, we use it to raise questions

about the continuities and disjunctures of what we understand as the current round of incorporating margins across Asia. Resource frontiers are sites in which new forms of territorial power are formed through the convergence of a variety of forces. They are also windows onto broader processes of managing risk, facilitating accumulation, and reconfiguring sovereignty. Through the analytic of frontier assemblage, contributors offer a perspective on such transformations that does not – a priori – privilege specific causal understandings, but augers a mapping of flows, frictions, interests, and imaginations that accumulate in particular places to transformative effect.

Asian Margins in Flux?

As a rich literature shows, the dynamic tension between centres and margins is a key trope in Asian history. Whether for purposes of settling and managing questionable populations, instituting sedentary agrarian regimes, opening up new spaces for trade and capital expansion, shoring up colonial and national security, or producing ‘buffer’ zones between competing empires, the production and management of margins as frontiers has been a constant and unfolding challenge in the making of Asian sovereignties, territories, and regimes of rule. The tensions of incorporating fugitive landscapes in pre-colonial Southeast Asia (von Schendel, 2002; Tagliacozzo, 2005; Scott, 2009); the imperial management of peripheries in early Modern China (Crossley et al., 2006; Bryson, 2016); the colonial attempts to settle unruly frontiers in South Asia (Bayly, 2000; Ludden, 2011; Zou and Kumar, 2011); and the politics of managing postcolonial and Cold War rivalries in upland and remote spaces throughout the continent (McGranahan, 2010; Eilenberg, 2011, 2012; Guyot-Réchard, 2016); are but a few well known moments in which marginal space has become central to regional and geo-politics. A constant throughout this frontier history has been the uncertainties, anxieties, and failures inherent in attempts to incorporate marginal spaces into logics of territorial rule. Read broadly, frontiers in Asian history emerge not just as the bleeding edge of territorial expansions and empires, but as ambiguous sites where opportunity and possibility are intimately linked to resistance and official unease. The dynamics under examination in this volume, then, might be thought of as only the current round of a much longer historical dynamic.

Yet, the scope of this current moment of frontier expansion – alongside its human and ecological costs – demands a critical interrogation of the resonances and disjunctures in the making of new resource frontiers across the continent. There are a range of proximate drivers of this

current expansion. Ongoing waves of neoliberal reform have contributed to the opening up of both economies and particular spaces to foreign direct investment and corporate management. This is particularly apparent in the explosion of export processing and concession zones that have emerged across Southern Asia during and in the wake of structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s. Alongside these dynamics of liberalization, neo-Malthusian narratives about scarcity have heralded massive expansions of plantation-based monocultures in marginal and upland space. A parallel Malthusian logic of energy security has wrought similar expansion. Marginal spaces across the continent are increasingly the sites of prospecting for oil, natural gas, and coal, as well as the locations for new and often massive hydro-electric projects. These processes constitute an important part of the broad and much debated 'global land grab' (Dwyer, 2013; Wolford et al., 2013b; Baird, 2014).

Collectively, these transformations in land and the meanings of both frontiers and marginal space might be thought of as a critical conjuncture in the longer trajectory of capital in Asia and beyond. Indeed, these phenomena have been a focal point of both activism and concerned scholarship in Asia over the past two decades. Scholars have critically examined the processes of producing marginal spaces as frontiers through analyses of enclosure, concessions, and special economic zones; the mapping of networks of national and transnational capital; and the exploration of the networks and circuits of labour involved in resource extraction (Tsing, 2005; Bach, 2011; Levien, 2011; Arnold, 2012; Eilenberg, 2012). Such analyses often figure resource frontiers as spatio-temporal fixes (Harvey, 2001): locales bound up in both producing value and solving a range of crises of over-accumulation. In other words, the political economy of these new resource frontiers situates them as key sites of capital: securing its expansion and insuring against its collapse.

Yet, as contributors to this volume demonstrate, capital is only one, if a central, force producing contemporary resource frontiers. Indeed, the chapters to come demonstrate a range of forces, actors, and processes equally crucial to the understanding of the current conjuncture. Many contributors highlight the various ways that futures and presents of environmental collapse lurk at the heart of frontier projects (Zee, Anderson, Paprocki, Choi). Others highlight the ways that the dynamics of imagination and fantasy shape new frontiers (Günel, Woodworth, McDuie-Ra). Still others trace the ways that the pasts of frontier production linger on and generate new possibilities and challenges within frontier space (Middleton, Lentz, Rubinov, Swanson). Key to all of these investigations are the ways that political economies of frontiers are always entangled with a broader array of factors that structure the

transformation of marginal space into frontier zone. Indeed, these entanglements themselves prove to be fruitful in understanding not only the dynamics of contemporary Asian resource frontiers, but the ways these spaces do and do not articulate with each other. Mapping these dynamics, then, offers ways to not only rethink resource frontiers, but to reimagine debates over globalization, with their often-narrow focus on urban space and networks of capital circulation. Indeed, such an outlook allows us to rethink and decentre the broad geopolitical paradigms that shape existing debates over resource frontiers and to open new questions about the structures and workings of both frontier space and global flow. To better understand these dynamics, we turn to our analytic of frontier assemblages.

Assemblages and Frontiers

'Frontier assemblage' brings together two highly, some might say hopelessly, overdetermined concepts in a single phrase. Both of these terms have been explored and debated in exhaustive detail elsewhere (Prescott, 1987; Donnan and Wilson, 1994; Baud and van Schendel, 1997; Wendl and Rösler, 1999; Geiger, 2008; Nail, 2017). Rather than rehearse these debates in full, we offer a thumbnail sketch of their genealogies before making a case for understanding resource frontiers *as* frontier assemblages.

The notion of assemblage springs from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 1987). It articulates an approach to understanding compositions of various sorts (social, ecological, territorial, etc.) beyond an analysis that reduces them to simple consequences of human behaviour. The concept is notoriously open-ended. As Deleuze argues, 'an assemblage is first and foremost what keeps very heterogeneous elements together: e.g. a sound, a gesture, a position, etc. both natural and artificial elements. The problem is one of "consistency" or "coherence", and it is prior to the problem of behavior' (Deleuze, 2007: 179). Assemblage, then, is a loose theoretical framework that seeks to destabilize classical models of social theory with their emphasis on human causality, and to replace it with what Deleuze calls 'hodgepodes': contingent collections of things whose coming together itself is not the precondition, but rather the object of inquiry.³

Our use of the notion of assemblage builds on framings in anthropology and geography that use it to map historically contingent convergences (Ong and Collier, 2005; Marcus and Saka, 2006; Li, 2007a; Anderson et al., 2012; Dittmer, 2014) and the ways they often coalesce in objects, spaces, and landscapes (Braun, 2005, 2006; Ogden, 2011; Ranganathan,

2015; Smith and Dressler, 2017). We use it not as a means of rejecting history, political economy, or biopower but rather to trace particular possibilities at specific moments and places. We offer readings that inquire into the material and discursive, human and non-human agencies involved in shaping connections between the often heterogeneous elements at play in the making of frontier space. Writing of conjuncture, a framework to which our notion of assemblage shares significant resemblance,⁴ Tania Li writes, 'Rejecting notions of a functional equilibrium, a conjunctural approach treats practices that appear to hold constant for a period of time as a puzzle, as much in need of examination as dramatic change' (Li, 2014a: 18; see also Müller, 2015). Read as such, the examination of assemblages offers a way of understanding the temporalities and spatialities of configurations of frontier opportunity, value, and violence.⁵ As Li further notes, within these assemblages 'elements are drawn together ... only to disperse or realign, and the shape shifts according to the terrain and the angle of vision' (Li, 2007a: 265). Assemblage thus provides a 'frame of specific complexity around the vision of unstable, heterogeneous structure' (Marcus and Saka, 2006: 104). It directs us to understanding the social world as transitory, mosaic, and fluid and helps us understand or decipher the messy interactions between new strategies of capital accumulation and the politics of space and place in frontier zones (Massey, 1994). And perhaps most centrally, it offers a non-deterministic frame for thinking through the shifting temporalities, interests, materialities, and imaginations that cohere at particular moments to produce particular spaces as resource frontiers.

If assemblage's history is fairly short, the notion of the frontier has a longer and more ambiguous trajectory. The term has been widely, and often unreflectively, applied as a heuristic device to describe processes of transition, exclusion and inclusion both physically and figuratively. There are myriad ways to approach the subject and a lack of anything resembling conceptual consensus has made defining the concept a challenging endeavour. The concept of frontier first emerged in Europe in the fourteenth century with the French word 'frontière' indicating a façade in architecture. Only later did it come to mean the limits of state control or edge of empire (Rieber, 2001: 5812; see also Febvre, 1973). There is an intimate, but often unclear, relationship between the word and the concept of frontier (Febvre, 1973). Within the English and American tradition this is further complicated by the use of the word interchangeably to denote literal borderlines, figurative borderlands, regions just beyond the pale of settled areas, and the process of territorial expansion of state authority or civilization into remote 'wastelands' and margins (Wendl and Rösler, 1999; Brown, 2010). As Redclift argues, 'The frontier is both a boundary *and* a device for social exclusion, a zone of transition *and*

new cultural imaginary' (Redclift, 2006: viii). Frontiers often refer to regions where the state is presumed to struggle to assert its authority and is thinly spread (hence the notion of 'frontier justice' as a form of violent rule that is negotiated at an eminently local level). But frontiers are also liminal spaces open for production and inventiveness (Korf and Raeymaekers, 2013). They can be zones of Schumpeterian creative destruction and transformation where imagined wastelands and backwaters presented as unoccupied and vacant are turned into sites of capital accumulation. At the same time, they may also become spaces of social experimentation, innovation and hybridity where new political subjectivities are shaped and new governance structures tested.

For our purposes, we understand frontiers as *imaginative* – zones in which the material realities of place are inextricably bound to various visions of and cultural vocabularies for what the frontier is and might be. To that end, three classic framings of the frontier are useful to keep in mind as we develop our argument. These framings are not objective realities or ideal types of frontier spaces. Rather, they are imaginations of the relationship between margins and centres that, as authors in this volume show, have grave and eminently tangible implications for these spaces and those living within them. First, the frontier is often imagined as integral to broader economic activity. The frontier has historically been framed not only as a space of entrepreneurial opportunity, but as a zone that is fundamental to the survival of capitalism itself. This argument can be traced through any number of theories of political economy, but is particularly evident in the Marxian tradition. Here, the frontier figures alongside of surplus-value as the (other) engine of capital. Frontiers are the condition of possibility for capitalist expansion (Patel and Moore, 2017). They are the sites in the midst of incorporations and enclosures through what Marx called primitive accumulation (1976) and what Harvey reframes as accumulation by dispossession (2005). Here, frontiers are sites where capitalist crises of over-accumulation are resolved in ways that forestall broader crises and systemic collapse. In other words, frontiers are imagined to be the necessary historical counterweights to industrialization. Our suggestion in calling this an imagination is not to take issue with Harvey. Indeed, in many of the sites explored in this volume, accumulation by dispossession seems an apt descriptor. Rather, it is to call attention to a particular vision of frontiers that reduces them to functions of capital. This vision of the frontier, we suggest, animates a broader understanding of frontiers as crucial spaces that hold the key to economic expansion, development, and growth.

The second is the anxious imagination of the frontier as a site of danger and lawlessness. Here, frontiers are construed as the rims of empire – spaces at the limit of the reach of state control. The frontier is