



Bordering dynamics and the geopolitics of cross-border tourism between China and Myanmar[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Bordering dynamics
The China-Myanmar border
Cross-border tourism
Security-economy nexus
Territorial politics

ABSTRACT

The impacts of border politics on tourist mobilities become even more explicit in unstable and geopolitically sensitive borders. The balance between security and economy in the course of tourism development can be easily disrupted at these unstable borders, as shown in the case between China and Myanmar. This article explores the enabling and disabling of cross-border tourist mobilities—legal day trips for sightseeing and illegal border-crossers for gambling—to reveal how these two tourist mobilities are driven by differences (exotic culture vs. sinful gambling) and regulated by Chinese law enforcements (protective control vs. stringent deterrence). We find that borders can both invoke a special type of fascination among tourists and become a territorial barrier to limit tourist mobilities into foreign countries. The article presents two arguments. First, the operation of bordering dynamics discursively produces the geopolitical difference between two sides of the border, a difference allowing state agencies to promote and order cross-border tourism. Second, no matter how much it can contribute to the local economy, the cross-border tourism industry is subordinated to security concerns caused by illicit activities and political instability, particularly when national governments can effectively exercise power in their border regions. Together, the interlinked pattern of debordering for tourist money and rebordering for national security generates an explicit spatial expression of bordering dynamics.

1. Introduction

Borders are attractive to tourists, for two primary reasons. First, borders represent a unique marker of national territory; second, border-crossing into a foreign territory can generate special excitement (Stoffelen, 2018; Timothy, 2001). Much has been written about the relationship between tourism and border politics in Europe, and particularly in the Schengen Area in which cooperative modes of cross-border tourism development are created to foster functional economic zones across European internal frontiers (Prokkola, 2011; Stoffelen, 2018). Nevertheless, cross-border tourism in Europe remains filled with competition, confusion, and conflict (Dowler, 2013). The impacts of border politics on tourist mobilities become even more explicit in unstable and geopolitically sensitive borders where flows of people and commodities succumb to abrupt closure, due to armed conflicts,

organized crime, and political tensions (Gelbman, 2008; Timothy, 2001).

The border between Myanmar and China is one such unstable and geopolitically sensitive border.¹ The border region in northern Myanmar's Shan and Kachin states is virtually restricted to foreign tourists, including those from China. This region includes semiautonomous districts controlled by ethnic armed organizations, and the vast amount of land between Lashio and Muse managed by the Burmese Armed Forces (called *Tatmadaw* in Myanmar) (Aung Myoe, 2011; Ong, 2018; Woods, 2011). In Yunnan, the Chinese province adjacent to northern Myanmar, law enforcements impose stringent control over the border in order to prohibit drug trafficking from Myanmar, and to deter the illegal flows of people into and out of Yunnan. One particular illegal flow is constituted by Chinese nationals who secretly cross the border and gamble in casinos in Myanmar's border cities. Border checkpoints between China

[☆] We feel grateful to three reviewers, Alec Murphy, and the editor Kimberley Peters for valuable comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. The funding support comes from the Center for Burmese Studies in Yunnan Normal University, Yunnan Department of Science and Technology (Grant No. 202001AS070032), and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 41829101 and 42071182). Any remaining errors are our responsibility.

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¹ In this article, "Burma" is used to refer to the country until 1989. Its name was changed to "Myanmar" from 1989 onwards.

and Myanmar are not open to tourists who hold private passports and entry visas.² Nevertheless, Chinese tourists who visit Yunnan's border cities express interest in crossing over to visit Myanmar and sightseeing a different culture on the other side. Economic benefits brought by these tourists are significant to both sides of the border, calling for special arrangements to meet their desire for cross-border tours. When both sides agree to activate cross-border tourism, local police departments in Yunnan's border cities issue a Cross-border Tourist Exit-Entry Permit to Chinese tourists so that they can legally enter into northern Myanmar for a well-ordered day trip. Meanwhile, those Chinese nationals who want to gamble in northern Myanmar are excluded from this special arrangement, but must illegally cross the border to evade Chinese law enforcers' control. An analysis of these two forms of tourist mobilities—legal day trippers and illegal gamblers—can shed light on the uneven spatiality of border control.

With this background in mind, we investigate the Chinese government's control upon Chinese tourists' cross-border trips to northern Myanmar. Specifically, we ask the following research questions: How is northern Myanmar represented as "the other" on the Chinese side? To what extent does this representation justify the Chinese state's border control upon cross-border tourist mobilities into northern Myanmar? How does the synthesis of othering and ordering fit the general pattern of border control? To answer these questions, this article positions itself at the interface of the literature on cross-border tourism and bordering dynamics. This interface corresponds to Mostafanezhad's (2018) emphasis on the increasing role of tourism in international and domestic relations, particularly in the terrains of securitization, territorialization, migration, and nation building.

Indeed, scholars have explored tourism as a geopolitical strategy to shape political struggles and territorial disputes. The cases include the South China Sea (Huang & Suliman, 2020; Mostafanezhad, 2020), the border between Israel and Egypt (Kemp & Ben-Eliezer, 2000), and the geopolitics of Buddhist heritage in Nepal (Bhandari, 2019). These case studies highlight how tourism enters into the making of international and domestic politics, but suggest that gaps exist in the literature that do not acknowledge the influence of geopolitical orders in reconfiguring tourism development. Furthermore, these studies overwhelmingly focus on tourist-receiving countries and pay limited attention to how state authorities in tourist-sending countries regulate outbound tourists for security concerns in geopolitically unstable areas. By placing order upon tourist mobilities, state authorities aim for "the classification of particular areas in order to regulate people and resources" (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018, p. 388). Without a full understanding of how tourist mobilities are ordered, the literature on the geopolitics of tourism runs the risk of exacerbating the role of tourism in geopolitical relations and failing to understand the vulnerability of tourism to state regulations, particularly at the border.

Addressing the lacuna in the literature, this paper uses the Ruili (China)-Muse (Myanmar) border crossing as a case study to explore the border's enabling and disabling roles upon tourist mobilities. Accounting for about 80 percent of overland border crossers and 60 percent of overland commodities between China and Myanmar, this border crossing constitutes a key channel of cross-border mobilities both legal and illegal. We compare two types of cross-border tourist mobilities from Ruili to Muse: legal group tours for sightseeing and illegal border-crossers for gambling. This comparative study attempts to reveal how these two tourist mobilities are driven by differences ("exotic culture" vs. "sinful gambling") and regulated by Chinese law enforcements (protective control vs. stringent deterrence). We argue that borders can both invoke a special type of fascination among tourists and become a territorial barrier to limit tourist mobilities into foreign countries. As

² Since January 1, 2020, Chinese nationals with service passports can pass the Ruili (China)-Muse (Myanmar) border checkpoint to enter into Myanmar. This is the only checkpoint open to passport holders.

van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002, p. 126) emphasize, territorial borders "continuously fixate and regulate mobility of flows and thereby construct or reproduce places in space." Specifically, the interlinked pattern of debordering for tourist money and rebordering for national security generates an explicit spatial expression of bordering dynamics.

This article's contribution is twofold. First, it contributes to border studies by showing that the operation of bordering dynamics discursively produces the geopolitical difference between two sides of the border, a difference allowing state agencies to promote and order cross-border flows. Nevertheless, this process is filled with competition and compromise, or as Harvey (2003, p. 29) points out, "intertwines in complex and sometimes contradictory ways" with capital accumulation. The negotiation for debordering and rebordering represents a very engaged, if not necessarily successful, attempt to align national sovereignty and border security with local social and economic development in border areas.

Second, the article contributes to the literature on tourism politics by emphasizing that no matter how much it can contribute to the local economy, the cross-border tourism industry can be subordinated to the geopolitical logic of national security threatened by illicit activities, political instability, and more recently, COVID-19. In countries such as China where national governments can effectively exercise power in their border regions, this subordination can mean stringent control and even border closure against cross-border tourist mobilities. At the border, the conventional logic of geopolitical security does not give way to the new logic of geoeconomic liberalization for tourist revenues or the postterritorial logic of multilevel global governance (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Sparke, 2018; Teschke, 2003). By exploring the Chinese government's control over cross-border tourism, we highlight that bordering dynamics exemplify "the enduring authority of the state to determine who and what has legitimate territorial access" (Andreas, 2003, p. 110), and thus challenges the common view of tourism as freedom of movement at borders or a privileged form of transnational mobilities.

The article proceeds in six sections. The next one reviews the literature on the geopolitics of cross-border tourism and builds a conceptual framework of bordering dynamics—othering and ordering at the border. It is followed by a section on data collection, and another one on the changing geopolitics between China and Myanmar as a contextual background. Then I explore the discursive construction of northern Myanmar as Other to attract Chinese tourists for sightseeing or gambling. The final empirical section presents the Chinese state's order making—placing sightseeing tourists in groups for safety and deterring gambling tourists from illegal border crossing. The article is concluded with theoretical thoughts on border control and cross-border tourism.

2. Unpacking bordering dynamics in cross-border tourism

While border tourism can cover tourism activities that happen in border regions (Mansfeld & Korman, 2015), we specify that cross-border tourism occurs only when people physically cross the border into a different country for tourism-related consumption activities (Timothy, 2001). Cross-border tourism represents a unique form of mobility in the border region in three ways. First, it synthesizes flows of people and service-based trade which entail a specific mobility different from either migration or flows of commodities. Second, cross-border tourism has already become a major locational policy to promote social and economic development in those border regions that have been neglected in the national economy and lag behind their counterparts in the heartland (Chow & Tsui, 2019). Finally, cross-border tourism can contribute to socioeconomic development and promote political stability in borderlands through what Stoffelen (2018) calls soft region-building. Decision-making networks for cross-border tourism may stimulate transnational cooperation among firms and state agencies and establish grassroots linkages between local communities (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

Regarding the geopolitical nature of tourism, scholars address how tourism becomes an important instrument to reconfigure geopolitical relations and practices. By analyzing the geopolitical tourism encounter, Gillen and Mostafanezhad (2019) emphasize the quotidian power of tourism in shaping multiscale geopolitical relations. Some scholars further argue that tourism as an embodied, quotidian practice cannot be divorced from state-driven geopolitics, since tourism becomes an instrument of soft power by state authorities to extend their power over targeted territories (Rowen, 2016; Stoffelen, 2018; Timothy, 2001). Mostafanezhad (2020) expands this idea by showing that tourism is a geopolitical strategy to reconfigure local and state authority over nature and culture for political control and capital accumulation. As Mostafanezhad (2020, p. 444) finds, in the South China Sea, the Chinese state “weaponizes tourism in its territorial claims of the Paracel Islands” while in Myanmar, tourism highlights the state’s control over postconflict sites in Karen state. Therefore, Gillen and Mostafanezhad (2019, p. 76) emphasize the geopolitical implications of the tourism encounter in order to understand “the shaping of broader narratives of territorialization, securitization and state-building in and through tourism.”

While the literature highlights tourism as a geopolitical strategy to shape territorialization and securitization, we must be careful about the function of tourism in geopolitical ordering in the world. The narratives and practices of territorialization and securitization profoundly shape tourism, particularly when nation-states prioritize security concerns over tourism development in geopolitically-sensitive areas (war zones) or during critical moments (e.g., the 9/11 attacks in the U.S.). In 2020, for instance, to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, various countries virtually closed border checkpoints and suspended tourism flows. When COVID-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, China, the Chinese state immediately imposed lockdowns on January 23, 2020 upon 11 million residents in the city and restricted nationwide mobilities, tourism included, to contain the virus. Coming to a grinding halt, the tourism industry retreated into insignificance in China (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). Accordingly, overland border checkpoints were completely closed and convenient channels between Yunnan and Myanmar sealed by security guards. At the time of this writing in September 2020, all border checkpoints in Yunnan remain closed to tourists and border residents, except for cross-border cargo trucks for the purpose of trade. It would be unrealistic to overstate the power of tourism in shaping geopolitical ordering without clarifying its limits.

Furthermore, an analysis of the geopolitical encounters of tourism calls more attention to the daily spaces of leisure consumption (Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019). This emphasis on everyday geopolitics in tourism is reminiscent of the booming critical geopolitics literature on the quotidian ways in which “people live geopolitics” through meanings and practices (Dittmer & Gray, 2010, p. 1671). This article fully recognizes the role of discourse, texts, and meaning in everyday geopolitics (Agnew, 2003) and draws on this theoretical tenet to explore how northern Myanmar is discursively constructed as othering to Chinese tourists. Additionally, we highlight the importance of ordering practices—rebordering and debordering by state authorities—in shaping everyday experiences at the border. As Andreas (2003, p. 108) reminds us, how to balance the border goals of facilitation (debordering) and enforcement (rebordering) continues to be “one of the most bureaucratically, technologically, and politically challenging tasks facing governments in the twenty-first century.” Together, we examine both discourses and practices that enter into the geopolitics of cross-border tourism (Agnew, 2003). To achieve this goal, we draw on the work by van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002) who emphasize that bordering dynamics entail two interrelated practices: othering and ordering.

Othering means the use of discourses to geopolitically construct differences between “us” and “them” in order to govern and preserve certain socioeconomic values. This is a process of constructing geopolitical imagination which enables political elites and mass populations to act in the world in pursuit of their own identities and interests (Agnew, 2003). This process, according to Spierings and van der Velde (2013),

entails constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing differences between places on both sides of the border. For instance, U.S. policymakers built upon the imagination of a “Greater Middle East” to draw a line between enemies and allies, and thus justify the war on terror (Güney & Gökcan, 2010), while U.S. media sources represent Mexico as an illegal drug source country where military and police are violent, corrupt, and involved in drug trafficking (Weimer, 2011). Here, the Other is needed to maintain the cohesion and order of a territorially demarcated society, particularly at the border (Said, 1979). For instance, refugees and asylum-seekers at the door are framed as othering subjects or strangers who, according to Bauman (1995), cause anxiety and intend to wipe out consoling familiar ways of life at home. Nevertheless, strange people and landscapes on the other side of the border represent a source of uniqueness, which holds a strong fascination for tourists (Timothy, 2001). Here difference provokes both fear and excitement. The former, related to security challenges, should be deterred, while the latter, caused by “exotic” culture and people, can be used for tourism development simply because “pleasure is drawn precisely from mutual estrangement, that is from the absence of responsibility” (Bauman, 1995, p. 132). Therefore, Spierings and van der Velde (2013) argue that socio-cultural differences derived from other languages, unfamiliar goods, and unknown spatial symbols on both sides of the border could generate excitement and stimulation, but could be regarded as problematic and deterring. Geopolitical imagination creates a binary geography to separate “us” from “other,” providing grounds for the practices of ordering upon cross-border flows of people, capital, and commodities.

As far as border control is concerned, ordering unfolds in two interrelated strategies: rebordering and debordering. The former suggests control, closure, and differentiation in order to activate state-led securitization (Herzog & Sohn, 2019), while the latter indicates openness, limited or zero barrier, and integration, for the purpose of economic globalization and trade liberalization. Since the 9/11 attacks, rebordering through coercive means takes primacy against unwelcomed and even undocumented migrants who attempt to pass overland into foreign countries (Jones & Johnson, 2016). The use of force and military weapons becomes “the most appropriate and efficacious means to solve problems” related to border security (Kraska, 2007, p. 503). This coercive strategy of rebordering is accompanied by the process of debordering to facilitate cross-border flows of commodities, capital, and tourists. In their pioneering work, Albert and Brock (1996) assert that the process of debordering represents an increasing permeability of borders and a parallel trend in which states lack adequate ability to counter the opening of borders. Building upon this notion, Herzog and Sohn (2019, p. 183) conceptualize debordering as “the removal of border impediments allowing for free and open crossings and interactions.” This removal is particularly important to cross-border tourism which requires efforts to go beyond traditional and nationally-bound administrative frameworks and build transnational collaboration that involves public and private players from both sides of the border.

Bordering dynamics through othering and ordering involves the nexus of security and economy. This nexus entails a tension in which the transnational flows of capital, commodities, and privileged people require debordering in order to facilitate the logic of profit making through trade, investment, and tourism. But this debordering can vitalize unwelcomed, undocumented, and even illegal flows, which have been regarded as challenges to national security. The geopolitics of cross-border tourism emanates from this very tension in the border region. The typical example is the construction of the security fence between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to create geopolitical obstacles that tend to hinder cross-border tourism (Gelbman, 2008). In another case, cross-border tourism contributed by American tourists, one of Mexico’s biggest sources of foreign income, has been hard hit since 9/11 by unilateral concerns with security on the U.S. side (Dear, 2013). Efforts to create a risk-free and manageable environment for cross-border tourism nurture a myopic form of economic development

in border regions. When security challenges brought by drug trafficking and terrorist attacks threaten social and political stability or menace tourists, state agencies can activate rebordering to intensify border control and even cease cross-border tourism.

In sum, the geopolitics of cross-border tourism is bound up with bordering dynamics to reveal the security-economy nexus which highlights the need to safeguard border security in the process of capital accumulation. States deploy ambitious and innovative efforts to implement border control in order to territorially exclude clandestine transnational actors on the one hand, and to facilitate territorial access for desirable entries on the other (Andreas, 2003, 2011). Therefore, the word *borders* cannot be understood as places fixed in space and time, but rather as “an ongoing strategic effort to make a difference in space among the movements of people, money or products” (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002, p. 126). Drawing on these conceptual tenets, our analysis in the following sections exemplifies the articulation of macro-processes of political economy in the micro-realities of cross-border tourism, to unravel how bordering dynamics intertwine with the security-economy nexus in a geopolitically sensitive border. Before we proceed further, a note on data collection is needed.

3. Data collection

Fieldwork was carried out in Ruili and Muse in July 2017 and August 2019. As we mentioned earlier, the border checkpoints in Ruili and Muse, as other overland ports between China and Myanmar, are not open to passport holders. It was impossible for us to legally obtain a Border Inhabitant Card from Ruili Police Department, since our household accounts are not registered in Ruili. Hence, we did not have legal documents for regular border crossings between Ruili and Muse. Nor did we have a research visa from Myanmar’s federal agencies authorizing us to conduct research projects in Muse. Our friends in Ruili emphasized to us that it was too risky for Chinese citizens to conduct research fieldwork in Muse given the current political situation, especially if we attempted to explore illicit and even illegal business. As shown in the following sections, Muse is not a safe place for non-Myanmar scholars to stay long. To our knowledge, no scholars have ever conducted long-term fieldwork in Muse and other Myanmar border cities in Shan and Kachin states. The only exception could be Ong (2018) who built an affiliation with the UN World Food Programme as a cover to conduct fieldwork in the northern Wa region.

To overcome the administrative hindrance, we applied for a Tourist Exit-Entry Permit, issued by the Ruili Police Department, to join tour groups so that we could legally cross the border into Muse. Since we were not allowed to repeatedly apply for the permit for border crossing, we waited so that we could legally cross the border again, which explains why we conducted fieldwork in different years. To be frank, we were fearful of plain-clothed agents from the Military Intelligence of Myanmar which has a strong presence in Muse to gather intelligence and monitor suspects. During these three visits, both authors became “participant(s) in the social process being studied” (Veal, 1992, p. 101) by assuming the identity of tourists and by eating, touring, and gazing like other peers. We conversed with around forty tourists about their imagination of and reflection on their Myanmar trip, and solicited information from our Myanmar tour guides about the organization of cross-border tourism. The information from tourists and tour guides enriches our data, although the article mainly focuses on the Chinese state’s policies of border control.

For this policy-oriented analysis, we rely on two primary sources. The first source is archival research on policies, yearbooks, media reports and political speeches related to cross-border tourism in China and Myanmar. Since May 1, 2008, the State Council, China’s highest administrative organ, has enacted the Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Open Government Information. Following this ordinance, subnational governments must disclose government information promptly and accurately, which enables us to collect much-

needed information about cross-border tourism between Ruili and Muse from the Chinese perspective. In addition, we collected in Ruili destination brochures and tourism promotion videos to study the representation of northern Myanmar as both exotic and dangerous, which we examine in this paper.

The second source is key informant interviews. This method was originally used in the field of cultural anthropology to collect a panoramic review of local societies (Tremblay, 1957), and is now deployed widely in social science investigation, particularly for policy-related analysis (Bhuyan, Lane, Moogoor, Moćnik, & Yuen, 2020). It involves interviewing a small number of informants who are likely to provide needed information in a relatively short period of time. We conducted key-informant interviews in Ruili where we could legally stay and collect data. In total, we interviewed eight respondents, including two Chinese tour guides, four Chinese officials from bureaus related to security and tourism, and two Myanmar travel agency owners who run businesses in Muse. We invited these two Myanmar respondents to cross the border to see us in Ruili for an interview since they had documents. The interviews were held in Mandarin and lasted between 60 and 90 min. The interview topics included: (1) the regional politicoeconomic context; (2) the impact of border control on cross-border tourism; (3) tourism governance and local cooperation between Muse and Ruili; and (4) the organization of tourist routes in Muse. The analysis was inspired by theoretical questions about border control, tourist mobilities, and geopolitics, as well as by empirical themes emerging during the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and, together with field notes, were analyzed through MAXQDA to code interviews.

Regarding data collection for this research, three caveats are in order. First, this article focuses on how the Chinese state’s border policies shape legal and illegal outflows of Chinese tourists to northern Myanmar; hence, we chose to pay limited attention to tourists’ actual experiences. Second, key informants might divulge information only from their own standpoints. Reliance on informants on the Chinese side indicates that findings might be skewed or biased, even though our analysis of policy issues related to border control does not pursue overall data representativeness. Although interviewing more respondents, particularly those from Muse, could be ideal, cross-border arrangement did not permit inviting them easily to Ruili. As Müller-Funk (2020) points out, doing fieldwork in politically fragile contexts requires researchers to handle competing identities, obligations, and conflicts of interest, and sometimes make implicit or explicit choices related to diverging interests of different individuals. Our choice is to stay legal and alert to get a nuanced impression of how cross-border tourism is operated between Ruili and Muse. Finally, we triangulate four sources to ensure the validity of our data: official documents from the governments in Dehong and Ruili, news reports from Myanmar, in-depth interviews with key informants, and our participatory trips as group tourists.

4. Changing geopolitics between China and Myanmar

Ruili (known as *Shweli* in Myanmar), a city located in China’s Yunnan province, shares a border with Myanmar’s two ethnic states—Shan and Kachin. It is also part of Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. In 2017, tourist arrivals in Ruili reached 5.06 million, and domestic tourists from Yunnan and China’s coastal cities accounted for 92.5 percent of Ruili’s tourism market (Ruili Office of Chronicles Compilation, 2018). In addition to its ethnic culture and natural beauty, Ruili promoted cross-border tourism so that domestic tourists can experience a different culture in Muse. Cross-border tourism between Ruili and Muse has been subject to changing geopolitical conditions between China and Myanmar. As early as March 1979, cross-border trade between Ruili and Muse was activated as a response to the opening and reform in China’s heartland. In March 1982, the State Council in China suspended trade in a massive campaign against smuggling from Muse to Ruili. In February 1985, the State Council propelled local authorities in China’s border regions to further open to their neighbors,

and prioritized cross-border trade as a strategy of local economic development (Ruili Office of Chronicles Compilation, 2013). Simultaneously, cross-border tourism between Ruili and Muse took off, as part of cross-border trade, to allow visitors to travel to the other side mainly for business rather than sightseeing.

In 1988, a political crisis exploded in Burma. Unhappy with political repression, economic plight, and widespread corruption, students and other social activists launched protests against the Ne Win administration and asked for multiparty democracy. On September 18, 1988, the *Tawmadaw*, led by General Saw Maung, retook power and launched a coup in a bloody repression of protests. Subsequently, the United States and other Western countries imposed strict sanctions upon Burma. Under this changing geopolitical condition, Burma has shifted since 1988 toward China to secure and consolidate its political and financial support, and cross-border trade via Muse and other Burmese border cities with Yunnan has received high priority from the *Tawmadaw* (Aung Myoe, 2011). On the Chinese side, the national government made efforts to boost poverty-stricken border areas in the early 1990s. Alarmed by increasingly uneven development between rich coastal cities and poor border regions, the central government in Beijing propelled border opening as a component of the grand project of economic reform, through which Chinese border cities can take advantage of their strategic locations for cross-border trade. In 1992, the State Council formally designated 14 border cities, Ruili included, as National Border Economic Cooperation Zones with preferential policies.

Once Ruili was designated as a National Border Economic Cooperation Zone, Yunnan provincial government utilized this policy to speed up border opening through trade and tourism. Several experimental cross-border tour routes were created to attract domestic tourists. In 1993, the Chinese National Tourism Administration formally approved

three routes, including a three-day group tour between Ruili and Lashio, a three-day group tour between Ruili and Bhamo, and an eight-day group tour between Ruili and Mandalay (see Fig. 1). In 1997, national governments in China and Myanmar signed the Agreement on Border Areas Management and Cooperation. According to the Agreement, Chinese tourists can apply for a Tourist Exit-Entry Permit in Ruili so that they can enter into the heartland of Myanmar and even travel south to Yangon and Bagan. Between 1991 and 2014, over 10 million cross-border tourist arrivals were officially recorded between Ruili and Muse, and the booming tourism industry generated substantial social and economic benefit to the Ruili-Muse border region (Ruili Office of Chronicles Compilation, 2013). Local business owners in Muse expressed the need to develop cross-border tourism. For instance, U Myo Than, secretary of Muse Tourism Association, contended that “We want to re-open for tourism development. At the moment, only day-return trips are allowed. If the government will allow multiday trips, a lot of Chinese visitors would visit Myanmar” (The Myanmar Times, 2017).

Parallel with the increasing legal flows of cross-border tourists are illegal flows of Chinese nationals to Muse for gambling. Responding to rampant cross-border gambling from Ruili to Muse, the Chinese central government in 2005 ordered Yunnan to unilaterally suspend cross-border tourism cooperation with Myanmar (Ruili Office of Chronicles Compilation, 2013). As a result, Chinese tourists were not allowed to legally pass overland checkpoints into Myanmar border cities. The once booming cross-border tourism came to an abrupt halt, and tourism-related business in Ruili and other Chinese border cities plummeted. Legal cross-border tourism was allowed only until 2013 when local authorities and tourism firms in Ruili and Muse collaborated to design a careful plan to ensure the safety of Chinese group tourists. Trips beyond Muse southward to Lashio and Mandalay have been

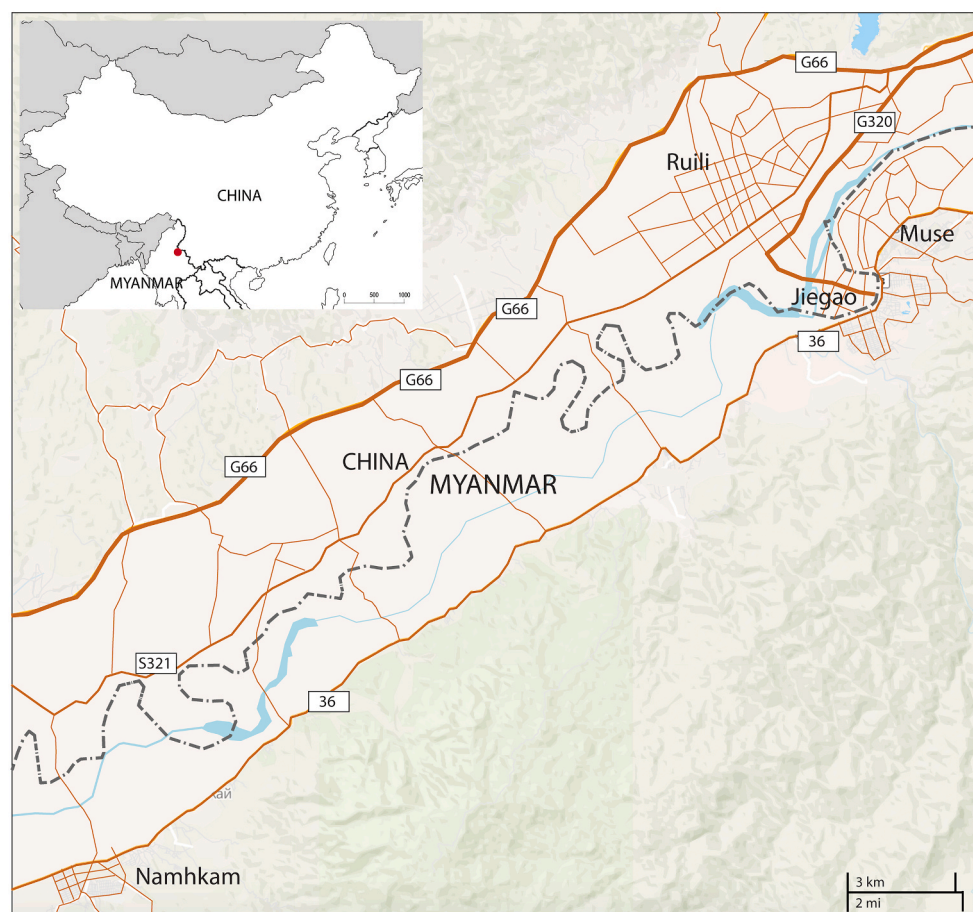


Fig. 1. The border region between China and Myanmar.

permanently banned. Despite several instances of border closure due to military conflicts in Muse, Chinese tourists have been allowed to use a special permit to cross the border for day trips since 2013. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2020, however, the border has remained close to both Chinese and Myanmar nationals.

The patterns of cross-border tourism between Muse and Ruili have been embedded in a changing macro condition of political economy. This condition ranges from China's economic reform and border opening in the 1980s and Myanmar's political crisis in the 1990s to the Chinese state's intervention against cross-border gambling in the 2000s. Illicit global economy, including cross-border gambling, can "push the security debate beyond its traditionally narrow confines" (Andreas, 2015, p. 785). Once the Chinese state realized the difficulty of handling cross-border gambling, it forcefully froze cross-border tourism to ensure national security against the easy mobility of tourists. Our analysis shows that the Chinese state carefully calculates what Sparke (2018, p. 485) calls "the interplay of geopolitics and geoeconomics." While Sparke points out that geostrategic discourses and practices reflect influential capitalist imperatives, this section demonstrates a different scenario by examining how in geopolitically-sensitive border regions, security concerns can outweigh geoeconomic benefits as the primary driver in bordering dynamics.

5. Othering: the construction of differences upon northern Myanmar

5.1. Exotic culture on the Myanmar side

As Mostafanezhad (2020, p. 441) points out, ethnic minority groups in Myanmar are normally represented by tourism operators as "timeless, authentic natives." Discourses of a remote, exotic frontier have become key metaphorical drives of the tourism industry in Myanmar's border regions open to Thailand and China. While Mostafanezhad (2020) focuses on the touristic representation of Karen state in southeast Myanmar, this imagination and representation of Myanmar's frontier is similarly replicated in Shan state in the northern highland. As far as tourism promotion is concerned, stakeholders on the Chinese side play an important role. Ruili city government regularly promotes border-related attractions, including those in Muse, as its main selling point to attract Chinese tourists. The overall myth of foreignness endows Muse with exoticism, appealing to Chinese tourists in search of new experiences unavailable in Ruili and other places in Yunnan. The strict regime of border control imposed by the Chinese state further adds value to a trip to Muse when permitted.

In every hotel in Ruili, Dehong Tourism Corporation, one of the three Chinese firms licensed to organize cross-border tourism between Ruili and Muse, displays a promotional board to recruit potential tourists (Fig. 2). The board features an attractive young Myanmar woman in traditional Myanmar costume, who greets tourists with a beckoning smile. Interestingly, her face is not covered by thanakha, which is a yellowish-white cosmetic paste popular among females to protect their skin from sunlight and represents a distinctive feature of the Myanmar culture. Below the featured photo, some major tourist attractions are listed to demonstrate highlights during the tour. Some key attractions include Buddha temples, theme parks, and natural attractions. In addition, two unique attractions are the Kayan or Paduang and Myanmar katoey. While the former refers to "an iconic ethnic group in Burma, known for the brass rings they wear around their necks which makes them appear elongated" (Mostafanezhad, 2020, p. 441), the latter describes a male-to-female transgender person who shows up in tourist settings and displays an exotic body to tourists. Together, these attractions presented in the promotional board reflect what Mostafanezhad (2020, p. 442) calls "everyday territorialization in tourism ... through discourses of primitiveness, backwardness, and authenticity." The efforts for othering conform to the rules of tourism production through which tourism firms promote Muse as a worthwhile site for Chinese



Fig. 2. A promotional board in a hotel in Ruili.

tourists to sightsee exotic culture and mysterious ethnic people. Muse symbolically represents beauty and exoticism, and highlights the myth of Otherness.

5.2. Danger and sin in northern Myanmar

The border region in northern Myanmar is not merely a seedbed of exotic culture and natural beauty, but also a zone torn by illicit drugs and military conflicts. Ever since independence in 1948, the *Tatmadaw* have fought with dozens of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and insurgent groups in Shan and Kachin states. As a result, northern Myanmar remains an area of what Risse and Stollenwerk (2018) call limited statehood in which state agencies and nonstate armed forces clash for territorial control and profit making, turning the highland into a significant source of "international instability—black holes in the new world order" (McCoy, 2003, p. 528).

As Myanmar's largest overland trade port, Muse had been heavily protected by the *Tatmadaw* and its local military alliances, but EAOs keep threatening the town's security. On November 22, 2016, three major ethnic military groups in Shan State, including the National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA), Ta'ang Liberation Army, and Kachin Independence Army, joined together to attack the *Tatmadaw*'s military posts in Muse. Myanmar citizens and Chinese citizens in Muse began to flow into Ruili for safety. Then the Chinese Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers were dispatched to replace civilian agents and control the checkpoints between Ruili and Muse for the purpose of border security. On May 12, 2018, the three EAOs attacked the *Tatmadaw* posts in Muse again, causing nearly 20 deaths. Our respondents in Ruili commented that people in Ruili could hear bombing and heavy artillery fire: "It is pretty scary, but we felt safe on the Chinese side" (an officer in Ruili Center for Policy Analysis) and "Tens of thousands of Myanmar

nationals fled to Ruili and every officer in the city government needed to participate in emergency activities such as managing displaced persons and patrolling the border” (an officer from the Ruili Police Department).

In addition to the danger brought by military conflicts, northern Myanmar's border cities adjacent to Yunnan are flooded with vice operations—gambling, drugs, and prostitution, which are regarded as three primary sins in China. While illegal in mainland China, gambling is allowed, if not legalized, in northern Myanmar. Acquiesced by the Myanmar government, local authorities and ethnic armed organizations collaborate with external investors from Hong Kong, Macau, and Yunnan to build casinos and gambling halls to exploit Chinese tourists' gambling lust. Casinos and gambling halls can be found in border towns in northern Myanmar, such as Mong La (Rippa & Saxer, 2016) and Kokang (Chin & Zhang, 2015). Addressing the regulatory vacuum in which local semiautonomous elites work with external investors to operate the vice economy, Nyíri (2012, pp. 554–555) suggests that “the prominence of gambling, drugs, and sex is arguably not just a product of short-term profit seeking, but also a functional element of this discourse of freedom.”

By definition, cross-border gambling is a form of tourism. To advance their gambling business, casino owners worked with Yunnan's unlicensed tour guides to lure Chinese tourists by promising free accommodation and meals. Once these fortune-seeking tourists illegally crossed the border into Myanmar, they had to gamble in casinos until they lost money. Miss Fang, one travel firm owner and a Chinese Myanmar national in Muse, tells a story in length:

Those Chinese nationals (zhongguo ren) came to Muse for gambling through informal border crossings. They lost money and then borrowed with a hope to win it back. Then they lost again and could not pay back. Casinos forced them to call their friends or family members for money. No money, no release. I have rescued a few hostages. Two years ago, a businessperson from Hunan province arrived at Muse for gambling. After losing millions of yuan, he took a usurious loan from the casino, but cannot pay back after another loss. The casino detained him for money. His relatives came to Ruili and contacted me for help. Once I figured out which casino controlled him, I informed the Muse police department. The police officers went to the casino and asked for the detainee from Hunan. Casino guards cannot say no but have to release him. Once he was deported from Muse to Ruili and felt safe, his relatives gave me 10,000 yuan and asked me to pass the money as a remuneration to those police officers. The border is quite complicated.

When we asked how people from Hunan knew her contact information, Miss Fang smiled and said that we needed to ask the Ruili Police Department. The case that Miss Fang handled explicitly details cross-border gambling by Chinese nationals in Muse, which is illegal and unprotected from the perspective of the Chinese government. It also indicates that the Ruili Police Department cannot unilaterally cross the border to rescue entrapped gamblers, but shared Miss Fang's contact information for an informal rescue operation. Between detained Chinese nationals and Muse's police officers are the intermediaries such as Miss Fang who have wide connections with legal forces on both sides of the border and underground gangs in Muse.

Similar stories related to entrapped cross-border gamblers between Ruili and Muse have been widely reported in Chinese media to exemplify gambling as a sinful and dangerous activity. Under eye-catching headlines such as “Crackdown on cross-border gambling” (People's Daily), “Chinese gamblers detained in punishment rooms are waiting for Chinese police” (CCTV news), and “Two detained gamblers died of torture in Muse's casinos” (Thepaper.cn), Chinese media sources reiterate that cross-border gambling is not about fortune or relaxation, but filled with danger and sin. These media reports reinforce the dominant imagination about northern Myanmar in general, and Muse in particular, as an othering place related to sin, danger, and lawlessness. Once

Chinese media sources portrayed Myanmar border cities as a land of vices—gambling, drugs, and prostitution, these popular discourses cast a shadow on cross-border tourism between Yunnan and Myanmar (Gao, Ryan, Cave, & Zhang, 2019). The discursive framing of cross-border gambling as “problematic” and “illegal” in the light of personal security raises questions about how mobilities can be ordered at the border, and justifies Ruili's police forces' coercive deterrence against illegal border crossing for the purpose of Chinese nationals' personal security.

6. Ordering: the enabling and disabling of tourist mobilities from Ruili to Muse

As Leese and Wittendorp (2018, p. 179) argue, under the guise of security, “some forms of movement become preferred, accelerated, and ‘waved through’ checkpoints, while other forms of movement arouse suspicion, become decelerated, diverted or brought to a sudden halt.” While the authors emphasize that the political decision to categorize movements should be built upon ethical considerations and normative valuations, it is actually derived from complex calculations between economy and security. Debordering and rebordering for tourism development between Ruili and Muse exemplifies the tension between the geopolitical logic of national security and the geoeconomic logic of cross-border flows.

6.1. Keeping group tourists in order

The economic benefit brought by cross-border tourism is necessary to both Ruili and Muse. Hence, local authorities in these two border cities must find an appropriate arrangement to promote cross-border tourism and ensure security. Cross-border collaboration is mobilized to upgrade the industrial structure for cross-border tourism. For instance, in the early 2010s, local departments in Dehong and Ruili, including public security, tourism, and foreign affairs, worked closely with the governments in Shan State and Muse to formulate a mutual agreement on how to promote and regulate cross-border tourism. In total, six travel agencies, three from Dehong and three from Muse, were licensed to operate one-day group tours. Local authorities and travel agencies from both sides agreed to reinforce tourism management, improve tourism facilities (restaurants and buses) and attractions in Muse and Nanhkan, implement a compulsory tourist insurance system, and train tourism employees.

In order to participate in cross-border tours, Chinese nationals from areas other than Dehong need to contact representatives of three licensed tour companies.³ The contact information can be easily found in every hotel in Ruili. These tourists visit a travel office to take a document photo, photocopy their national identity card, and pay a tour fee (about 428 yuan, ~US\$60) for the day trip. The fee covers the tourist permit application in Ruili and tour services on the Myanmar side (tour bus, tour guide, one lunch, and park admission). In the morning on the third day, Chinese domestic tourists go to the checkpoint and meet the representative to collect their Tourist Exit-Entry Permit and receive safety instruction. Using the permit, these tourists pass the checkpoint on the Chinese side and go to meet their Myanmar tour guides who are Chinese Myanmar nationals speaking Mandarin and Burmese. Once all members of a group tour arrive, the Myanmar guide carefully verifies their information and offers safety instruction again. Then the tour guide brings Chinese tourists to the checkpoint on the Myanmar side for entry.

Once they enter into Muse, these Chinese tourists are assigned to different tour buses and follow a well-planned route to visit several attractions and watch performances in Muse and Nanhkan, a Burmese border city 15 miles from Muse (Fig. 1). Chinese tourists are not allowed

³ Residents whose household registration (hukou) is located in Dehong prefecture can apply for a Border Resident Permit for border crossing from Ruili to Muse.

to leave the tour groups to wander on their own. Nor can they ask for extra activities not listed in the itinerary. Aware of the danger and sin prevalent in Muse, Chinese tourists choose to keep distance from local people, particularly those vendors selling cigarettes or Myanmar medicines. Encounters with ordinary Myanmar people occur rarely, except with performers, beggars, and service workers. In late afternoon these tourists pass the same checkpoint and return from Muse to Ruili. On the Ruili side, Chinese travel representatives welcome their customers to ensure that every tourist safely returns. Although our respondents do not tell how the economic benefits were distributed between Muse and Ruili, business owners from Muse always complained that they did not earn a lot from Chinese tourists. As one Burmese travel agency owner notes, “the Chinese control the tourist money and are quite mean. The tour is well controlled, with no room to make more money from Chinese tourists.” Despite the complaint from Myanmar travel firms about the control imposed upon Chinese tourists in Muse, local governments on the Chinese side clearly understand the economic contribution brought by tourism, as shown by extended length of stay, increasing accommodation cost, and more expenditure on food and travel.

Having said this, group tours can be immediately suspended once military conflicts burst out in Muse and leave China’s border security in tatters. Due to these conflicts, Ruili city government suspended cross-border tourism, even without an order from the central government. On July 24, 2017, for instance, the one-day trip resumed after an eight-month suspension, and then shut down again in May 2018. In March 2019, cross-border tourism resumed. Afterwards, violent conflicts between the *Tatmadaw* and EAOs continued, but away from Muse’s urban center, and cross-border tourism between Ruili and Muse ran as usual. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in China in January 2020, all border-crossings between Ruili and Muse, including formal checkpoints and informal channels, have been firmly closed to prohibit cross-border flows of migrants, traders, and tourists. This analysis concurs with Herzog and Sohn’s (2019, p. 198) idea about the comingling of debordering and rebordering, showing that “intense cross-border economic activities and flows exist alongside hardened militarized border policing practices.” While the Chinese state has not militarized the Muse-Ruili border, its travel ban demarcated a hardening line to forcefully suspend legal cross-border tourism for the purpose of security.

6.2. Deterring cross-border gamblers

Since 2013, Chinese tourists crossing the border legally into Muse have been under close control. Those who wanted to visit Muse’s casinos cannot legally pass the checkpoints between Ruili and Muse. Rather, they relied on convenient channels or tracks, with the help of local border villagers and motorcyclists, to illegally cross into Muse and other Myanmar border cities. When life threats, homicide, and torture actually happened to Chinese gamblers in northern Myanmar and became public in China, Yunnan’s border areas became the center of a media storm in which critics called out the Chinese state—nationally and locally—for failing to protect Chinese citizens, which triggered geopolitical unrest between China and Myanmar. Local governments in Yunnan faced enormous pressure to tackle cross-border gambling in order to provide a safe and friendly environment for Chinese tourists. Meanwhile, the Ruili Police Department could not send security officers to cross the border into Muse to shut down gambling dens and casinos. Here national territoriality has become “the challenge rather than the resolution to insecurity” (Cowen & Smith, 2009, p. 30).

Considering that the Myanmar state cannot effectively restrain vice operations related to drugs, gambling, and prostitution, the Chinese state takes unilateral action to impose order upon gambling-related business. In June 2003, Yunnan Department of Public Security launched a three-month crackdown on cross-border gambling (China-News, 2003). The main measures included suspending multiday cross-border trips and cutting power and telecommunication services to casinos on the other side, and closing casino-related accounts in Chinese

banks. Along the border fence, visible signs warn tourists against cross-border gambling. Since 2017, with strong support from upper-level governments, local authorities in Ruili have devoted substantial resources to sealing the border, mostly targeting illegal flows of commodities and people, including cross-border gamblers. In Ruili, all convenient channels are supervised by two surveillance cameras and one security guard to stop clandestine flows. In June 2017, the branch of the Agriculture Bank of China suddenly froze about 200 bank accounts allegedly involved in cross-border gambling. Among these accounts, about 30–40 were owned by Myanmar businesspersons. The substantial presence of law enforcement agencies since 2017 reflects the Chinese state’s heightened policy concern with clandestine activities in the border region.

Certainly, rebordering is part of a territorial strategy of exercising national sovereignty for security (Herzog & Sohn, 2019). But in this case, rebordering highlights the border as a frontline of defense through which the Chinese state invests enormous sums of money and technologies in Ruili to deter illegal cross-border flows. Since the Chinese state cannot externalize border control into northern Myanmar or build effective coordination with Myanmar law enforcements to crack down on gambling businesses, it must unilaterally harden the border under its political authority to fight against the negative influence of transnational vice economies. How much these unilateral efforts enhance border security is debatable, but they can generate uncertainty and fissures into cross-border tourism.

Our analysis of the orders imposed upon sightseeing tourists and cross-border gamblers does not imply a uniform practice of debordering or rebordering to regulate tourist mobilities. Rather, what emerges is an uneven border geography of order making which aims to place tourism mobilities in order and prioritize security over economic benefit. As Muse overflows with guns, drugs, brothels, and casinos, the Chinese state faces enormous security challenges. It can only allow legal flows of Chinese tourists into Muse with protective control, and deter tourists from illegal border crossing. Therefore, the practices of ordering entail a highly selective process of facilitation and enforcement. Or as Andreas (2003, p. 107) argues, these practices have created “new and technologically innovative filters at and beyond points of entry to try to separate out ‘undesirable’ from ‘desirable’ border crossings.” While Andreas and other scholars focus on how border control filters *inflows* of migrants, this selective process happens in China, but to filter *outflows* of tourists.

A further note on how labor migrants and tourists are comparatively regulated shows an interesting logic of border control at work upon cross-border mobilities. To deter the inflow of undocumented migrants, host countries such as the U.S. reinforce the geopolitical imageries of dangerous othering from afar and thus justify the need to protect what is regarded as one’s own cultural tradition and economic welfare. Governments in these host countries define deterrence against unwanted immigration as “the most prominent border tasks” (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002, p. 128). In contrast, to deter the outflow of Chinese gamblers from Ruili to Muse, law enforcements and mass media in China create a geopolitical differentiation of two sides between safety and danger, law and lawlessness, order and chaos, and thus defend the need to impose order upon cross-border tourists and prevent gamblers from illegally crossing the border to casinos in northern Myanmar. The goal is to protect Chinese nationals’ personal security and pursue an ordered border, or what Adelman and Aron (1999) call “bordered land” at the edge of China’s national territory. No matter how much the freedom to travel is advocated, tourism is implicated in and contributes to “the production and reproduction of securitized bordering practices” (Bianchi, Stephenson, & Hannam, 2020, p. 297). Notwithstanding the difference of targeted populations, bordering dynamics are driven by security.

7. Conclusion

This article analyzed the geopolitics of cross-border tourism in the border between China and Myanmar. By situating cross-border tourism between Ruili (China) and Muse (Myanmar) in a larger economic and political context, we have sought to explore the discursive construction of northern Myanmar as “other” and the ordering practices upon cross-border tourism. As developed through our analysis of cross-border tourism between China and Myanmar, the geopolitics of tourism reflects the security-economy nexus that is bound up with, and articulated through, the discourses and practices of bordering. The geopolitical construction of differences assures a selective process of ordering at the China-Myanmar border: enabling group tours to cross the border for exotic and imaginary experiences and disabling the illegal outflows of Chinese gamblers for dangerous and sinful experiences. Together, the goal is to install “a geographical ordering of presumably governable spatial units” through which the Chinese state can impose order upon cross-border tourist mobilities (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002, p. 128). Bordering dynamics both reproduce and reinforce place-based difference upon tourist destinations, and reconfigure cross-border mobilities among different groups of tourists.

Our argument about the geopolitics of cross-border tourism advances broader debates on border control. Cross-border tourism offers a poignant reminder of the security-economy nexus in cross-border regions, particularly those that are geographically sensitive. By analyzing how tourist mobilities are ordered at the border, the paper has shifted the focus from “disempowered” labor migrants to “empowered” tourists—those who cross the border for sightseeing or for gambling—in order to demonstrate how geopolitical power is exercised to control the supposedly apolitical activities of tourists who are privileged in the process of globalization. Despite the pervasive ideology of the right to travel by citizens in advanced capitalist countries, the fixity of borderlines and border regimes, embodied in visa control, travel bans, and security alerts, can determine the chance and composition of transnational tourist mobilities. The ordering practices upon different tourist mobilities from Ruili to Muse reaffirm Mau’s (2010) argument that borders are seldom open or closed *per se*, but rather draw on a pragmatic calculation of the balance between security challenges and economic interest. In other words, cross-border tourism reflects and reinforces the uneven spatiality of border enforcement. Together, we emphasize that geopolitical imagination frames the other as an existential threat or an exotic difference and thus recalibrates the binary between us and others. The practices of ordering through debordering and rebordering play an important role in reshuffling the construction of territory since they selectively allow cross-border flows and strategically create legal exception for new connections (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). While political geographers have dealt generally with the intersection of politics, territory, and people, this specific security-economy nexus—and indeed, the geopolitical role played by bordering dynamics in cross-border tourism—requires more research.

Theoretically, the security-economy nexus spells out the projection of geopolitical security upon the space of cross-border economy. While Sparke (2018) argues that this projection does not indicate that geoeconomics outweighs geopolitics as the primary guideline in cross-border regionalism, he emphasizes the need to understand geopolitical calculation in relation to the state’s role in global networks and free trade. The state becomes an around-the-clock guard with coercive power and financial means against security challenges either geopolitically constructed or actually existing. This feature raises a critical question: Whose security should be safeguarded? In parallel with debordering to facilitate the transnational flows of capital, commodities, and privileged people, rebordering is launched to deter unwelcomed, undocumented, and even illegal flows, all regarded as challenges to national security. The situation is arguably more complex than a simple dichotomy between empowered tourists and disempowered migrants. To paraphrase van Houtum and van Naerssen (2002), the certainty and

security rendered by a territorial order are prioritized over a world of a nonterritorial order. At stake is a larger question about the dynamic balance between security and economy in generating an uneven spatiality of border enforcement.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102372>.

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