The Art of Neighbouring

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

This book is the fruit of a long journey that started with a conference entitled “The Art of Neighbouring: Old Crossroads and New Connections along the PRC’s borders” held at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, in March 2012. This conference brought together scholars of different disciplines and regions and developed a comparative perspective on the ways in which China’s rapid economic growth, its strategic decisions to foster trade, secure influence, and access natural resources affect the lives and futures of the people living on both sides along its borders. China has in recent years embarked on a more assertive approach to redefine its role in the region. At the same time, China’s strategy to portray its rise as peaceful and benevolent continues to be relevant. These at times contradictory realities are the starting point for the contributors of this book to reflect on the common experiences and situated practices of neighbouring China.

Much of the current discussion on China’s rise and its growing global and regional influence concerns geopolitical and macroeconomic issues; it is largely based on state-centred policies and the various nuances of official rhetoric. Yet an important part that is missing in the discussion is the borderland itself and the people dwelling there. Borderlands are crucial junctures through which the increasing flows of raw materials, commodities and people are channelled. Looking from the borderlands back to the centres contributes to new insights into the region’s dynamic interconnectedness.

This book investigates the various meanings and modalities of neighbouring across Chinese borders. The title of this book suggests that neighbouring is an art of mediating relations against the background of peace and turmoil, hopes and fears. Neighbouring, as the contributors of this book show, helps us recognize evolving interactions between nations, territories, geo-political positionalities, historical connections, movements of people, as well as locally narrated identities.

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