

Bérénice Guyot-Réchar. *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 347 pp. \$31.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-62724-2.

Reviewed by Mahesh Shankar (Skidmore College)

Published on H-Asia (July, 2020)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

As scholars, students, and observers of the region well know, there is no dearth of scholarship on the Sino-Indian border dispute in the period leading up to the 1962 war. Over the past decade or so, in fact, the greater availability and relatively easier accessibility of newer archival material in both countries (albeit to a lesser extent in China) has led to a welcome burgeoning of literature on the relationship, from historians, political scientists, and other scholars as well as policy practitioners. For any new work to stand out in this newer landscape requires, therefore, for it to offer some truly new and interesting insights, and it is only the rare work that offers a genuinely new perspective from which to view the Sino-Indian relationship and its history. It is exactly this which Bérénice Guyot-Réchar accomplishes in *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962*.

With some exceptions, most works on the Sino-Indian relationship share some underlying characteristics that are by now familiar to observers and scholars of the region. Primarily, this scholarship has been interested in discovering the origins and causes of the Sino-Indian relationship (some term it a “rivalry”) in a broad sense, as well as to develop understandings of more specific issues of contention, most notably of the territorial dispute, and even more specifically, the causes of the 1962 war. On these questions, the scholarship

has settled (for the most part) into legislating and debating matters such as to what extent the dynamics of the relationship and on specific issues are driven by broader strategic (realist) concerns, and factors related to historical legacies, ideology, domestic political imperatives, and the individual perspectives and proclivities of leaders and elites.

This focus on rivalry (territorial, strategic, and ideological) has, in turn, engendered a second characteristic in much of this work: an almost exclusive preoccupation with the “high politics” that shaped and continues to shape the relationship. The emphasis, perhaps understandably, has been on the structural constraints and incentives faced by these governments, and the ideas and ideologies—about history, borders, and the nature of international politics at large—that guided the leaders of these states in their perceptions of and approaches toward each other. The central protagonists in this “high politics” are, quite naturally, the elite leaders and organizations—civilian and military—of the respective states, and the primary subject of analysis their thoughts and decision-making. This is clearly apparent, for instance, in how prominently the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru, Mao Zedong, and Zhou Enlai (as well as their most important officials and confidantes) and their ideological proclivities, strategic preferences, and de-

cision-making take center stage in the narratives of almost all of the prominent scholarship.

It is in this intellectual milieu that Guyot-Récharde makes a truly novel and significant intervention. Like much of the extant scholarship, this book too is animated by the desire to understand the causes, nature, and evolution of the territorial disputes between India (in both its British colonial, and postcolonial avatars) and China in their Himalayan borderlands. But here is where the similarities end. For one, this book offers a novel explanation for the Sino-Indian territorial contest. It suggests that any understanding of the dispute is impoverished by a sole focus on differing interpretations of historical borders, strategic and domestic political concerns, or the broader power contest between the two countries. Instead, the author asserts the importance of a heretofore missing (and crucial) dimension of the story. For her, “it is not just the boundary dispute or power games that create tension, but the fact that India and the PRC both seek to consolidate their presence in the regions east of Bhutan by achieving exclusive authority and legitimacy over local people” (p. 3). In other words, in the author’s telling of the story, key to understanding the dynamics of the Sino-Indian relationship in the border areas is the very process of state making in both countries in the postcolonial era, and how this manifested in these border areas where their presence and legitimacy ran weakest, inspiring thereby a process of “state shadowing” involving “mutual observation, replication, and competition to prove themselves the better state—becoming in short, anxiety-fueled attempts at self-definition against one another” (p. 4). Over time, it is this competitive “state shadowing,” as much any military-strategic considerations, that animated the conflictual dynamic—a “security dilemma”—that eventually precipitated war in 1962 (p. 229).

While the argument about state shadowing is in itself a valuable contribution to the scholarship, it is in the detailing of how these dynamics played

out on the ground, and influenced state policy, that the truly novel nature of this work shines through. By focusing on the competition between the two states for not just sheer *control* of the territory, but more importantly, *legitimacy* among the local populations, Guyot-Récharde offers a vital corrective to existing scholarship in decentering the narrative away from the states and elites on either side of the border and giving voice and agency to both the diverse populations who actually inhabit these border areas, and have and continue to negotiate and navigate this competition on a day-to-day basis, as well the state’s own local agents. In doing so, the story then ceases to be one concerned with the high politics of the Sino-Indian relationship alone, but importantly introduces the “low politics” as an important, and oft-neglected, shaper of the territorial dispute, resulting in a fascinating bottom-up account of the state-making effort on both sides, where policy was shaped by interactions of officials at the local level with local populations and their awareness of, and indeed “constant preoccupation” with, the other side’s initiatives across the border and how those were perceived by the Himalayan people (p. 18). More importantly, this focus on low politics in the book beautifully reveals how local populations themselves negotiated agency for themselves in complex ways, by utilizing varying strategies of engagement, acceptance, invitation, and resistance as they responded to the entreaties of both the Indian and Chinese states. What emerges from this story is the fascinating finding that “rather than possessed of an innate drive to escape the state, NEFA’s inhabitants were adverse to *a certain kind* of state presence—a presence based primarily on the use of violent coercion or the constant possibility of it and precluding local agency” (p. 119).

Such responses, of course, depended to a great extent on how the Indian and Chinese states themselves sought to shape local opinions. And here again, the book has some interesting insights in store. Contrary to popular perceptions, Guyot-Récharde contends that the approaches of the two

sides to the task of state making in the frontier regions in fact shared some basic commonalities. While India (certainly by the 1950s) had adopted a clear policy of “expressing state presence in benevolent terms” (p. 128) (articulated in a policy document titled *A Philosophy for NEFA*), with a focus on welfare measures related to areas such as education and health care, the Chinese too seemingly aspired to a similar process of “peaceful liberation” in Tibet (pp. 166-69). Nevertheless, it is a fact—made most apparent by developments in Tibet—that the Indian state confronted significantly less resistance (although certainly not none) compared to China in this effort at integrating frontier populations.

How then do we understand this? Guyot-Récharde’s explanation for this puzzle is that some of it likely had to simply do with contingent factors—for instance the fact that in Tibet, China was dealing with a previously full-fledged state. Such conditions in turn perhaps naturally necessitated a more military-first approach over time, something that was much less needed on the Indian side. Be that as it may, the clear impact of all of this was that India was more successful in adopting a more “hearts and minds” strategy vis-à-vis the local populations, which arguably allowed for it to create more *legitimacy* among frontier tribal peoples. More fascinatingly, though, it was not just the fact of India’s approach being philosophically and practically softer that made local populations more amenable to associating with India. Equally important was the fact that the relative absence of a military element in India’s “expansion” in to the region, accompanied by what was arguably relative inefficiency in creating hard infrastructure such as roads and railways that would allow for such power projection, meant that in contrast to China, India was relatively lax in establishing physical *control* over the territories and peoples in questions. All of this, Guyot-Récharde perceptively notes, rendered India vulnerable in ways that made it a *more* attractive partner to local populations. Indeed, “insofar as attempts of Indian au-

thorities were successful from the mid-twentieth century onwards, these had much to do with the paradox of their vulnerability—a weakness that rendered their entrenchment precarious unless local people acquiesced to it, but which also made this acquiescence more likely” (p. 126). In essence, then, there is an irony to the state-making efforts of India and China detailed in this book: the very fact that India was unable to establish reliable *control* in the frontier regions made it more viable for local populations to exercise agency, which in turn made them more likely to acquiesce to Indian approaches; for China, on the other hand, the very display of efficiency and control—as they did even during the 1962 war—ironically made them more problematic partners for their local audience, since it portended a limiting of their own agency.

The focus on “state shadowing” and the low politics of it also generates one final and crucial insight about both countries, an uncomfortable truth about the hypocrisy underlying the nature of their own state-making enterprise. It reveals, as the author summarizes things, that “the story of China and India is that of two post-colonial *and* imperial polities seeking to deepen their rule over Himalayan regions where they encounter people starkly different from their ‘core’ citizenry” (p. 3). These facets of Indian and Chinese conduct in the postcolonial period often escape attention, both in these countries as well as in the scholarship on their domestic and international politics. By offering this unique perspective on the Sino-Indian competition on their borders, this book does the great service of highlighting these problematic elements of states that have often understood and defined their roles in international politics on the basis of highlighting their own experiences with colonialism and imperialism.

In all, then, Guyot-Récharde has made a truly important contribution in this work to our understanding of the Sino-Indian border dispute, especially in reintroducing agency for the people who actually inhabit those contested lands, people who

rarely (if ever) feature in much of the existing scholarship. The effort is rendered even more compelling by the thorough and meticulous research that underlies the work, based on primary sources from national and local archives, private papers of key decision makers, and other such documents. Indeed, the focus on low politics has required the author to discover and analyze primary source material that has rarely (if ever) been used before. The use of local sources (both governmental and otherwise) and archives, in particular, is admirable, given the well-known challenges of both physical access to these areas, and even more so the availability and preservation of the documents themselves. As those who do archival research in these two countries can well attest, acquiring access to such resources can often be a daunting task even in the best of conditions (in capital cities and national archives); to then find and use sources from the frontier regions—the “peripheries” so to speak—could only have been an even more formidable task. For this the author deserves much credit.

If there is any weakness in this work, it lies perhaps in there being somewhat of an imbalance in the treatment and analysis of India and China respectively. While the argument itself is framed in a way that applies to both states, the India portions of the narrative are significantly richer, more detailed and nuanced than those that concern China. For instance, the low politics that is a key emphasis of this book really shines through when the author is detailing the Indian approach to, and interaction with, people of these Himalayan border regions, in comparison to which the discussion of China packs relatively lesser depth. That this is the case is perfectly understandable, given the simple fact of a greater availability and access to primary sources on the Indian side of the border. Despite this, one is left with the distinct impression—which the author gracefully acknowledges (p. 265)—that much of the China part of the story (and therefore any conclusions that can be drawn from it) requires more research, a gap that hopefully other

researchers can fill. More, in other words, needs to be known to truly understand the nature of Chinese state making in the frontier areas. No such reservations can exist with this work in regard to its telling of the story of Indian state making.

This is, however, a minor quibble about what is otherwise an outstanding piece of scholarship. *Shadow States* is a truly important work—well written and based on solid research—that offers a novel and necessary perspective from which to view the Sino-Indian border dispute in their shared Himalayan frontier region. It will no doubt change the way scholars and observers of the region view the yet-to-be-resolved border dispute, and the broader relationship itself, and hopefully inspire more scholarship which takes the low politics of such relationships, and the agency of local populations in disputed areas in the region, more seriously.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Mahesh Shankar. Review of Guyot-Réchar, Bérénice. *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54660>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.