

UNAUTHORIZED ARRIVALS:
RETHINKING BORDER CONTROLS IN EAST ASIA

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Abstract

Over the past two decades or so, the rise of cultural studies has gone hand in hand with growing scholarly interest in the issue of frontiers. The boom in research on diasporas, identities and cultural hybridity has encouraged much discussion about border-crossings and about the construction of the boundaries of nationhood and ethnicity. In all of this, however, less has been written about the frontier as a physical place at which individuals encounter the power of the nation state, sometimes in the most naked form. In anthropological terms, it is true that borders are “zones wherein the negotiations of international and transnational culture take place”. (See Donnen and Wilson 1994, 7-8) But they are also physical barriers which may slam shut in people’s faces, or across which they may be dragged kicking and screaming by police. This paper is a preliminary exploration of some historical aspects of physically-experienced national borders. Rather than viewing these borders as the geographical outer limits of the nation’s sovereignty, I want to consider them primarily as places where a *particular form of politics* takes place: a form of politics that deserves more attention than it has received to date. Political life is normally perceived as occurring within the polity – that is, within the bounds of the nation state. In East Asia particularly, for at least three-and-a-half decades after the end of the Pacific War, national frontiers were reinforced by the fissures in global society created by the Cold War. The frontiers between China and Russia, China and Taiwan, North and South Korea, Japan and Russia, Japan and China etc. became almost impassable barriers, intensifying the perception of the border as the natural outer limit of national sovereignty. Hence the entrenched images of Japan and Korea (in particular) as racially homogeneous, self-contained societies where migration and minorities have played an insignificant role in modern history.