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“Where is your other half?”: A Wedding shaped by the Profile, Politics and Potential of the Indo-China Border

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Abstract: We, two design researchers, citizens from India and China, had planned our wedding as a performative design act on the Indo China border. As we neared our performance site from either side, a border dispute broke out and there was a military stand-off between our armies keeping us separated by over a hundred kilometres. From this field-based project, we present three different design outputs: our designed wedding rings, then our wedding video shot at the border and a speculative architectural design program for wedding venues on political borders. In reflection we present the process of arriving at the decisions of these three different design artefacts and articulate three forces, namely profile, politics and potential of the border as shaping these design outputs. We attribute these characteristics of the Indo-China border as forces of design agency. With this we also present designing personal events as a discursive genre for Research-through-Design.

Keywords: rtd genre; field based design practice; constructive design research; border studies

1. Introduction

Research-through-design (RtD), as a knowledge making endeavour has considerably evolved in the past decade, both within the design discourse and also within the domain of Human Computer Interaction. Design objects and artefacts, their making, deployment and their documentation processes have been argued to be generators and communicators of various forms of knowledge (Bardzell, Bardzell, Dalsgaard, Gross, & Halskov, 2016; Gaver, 2012; Koskinen, Zimmerman, Binder, Redström, & Wensveen, 2012; Ozenc et al., 2007; Zimmerman, 2009). The RtD community is still growing, contributing to multiple academic domains, with streams within academic conferences and also having its own biannual conference (“RtD,” 2019). But a further need for its development is evident with multiple calls

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from various practitioners. These calls have been for a diversity in approaches, need of new genres of RtD's discourse to support its practice, and to be undertaken with more openness and articulation (Bardzell et al., 2016; Boess, 2016; Gaver, 2012). Heeding to such a need for furthering approaches of RtD, we wish to articulate a project we undertook, present its design outputs, and present 'designing of personal relation making events', as a genre for RtD. Our aim in presenting the project as a 'genre' is not for creating another academic subdivision within the still nascent field. Instead it is to indicate to the RtD community about the potential, scope and opportunities present in personal relation making events when undertaken as RtD.

To facilitate this discussion, we wish to position our argument within a specific sub-theme from this conference call, that of 'situation'. Within RtD, while context of the design act and objects have received emphasis (Koskinen et al., 2012; Mäkelä & Latva-Somppi, 2011; Zimmerman & Forlizzi, 2014), there are not particularly many discussions that highlight and emphasize how forces of a specific context and situation act as a design agent, shaping and forming, objects through the acts of design practitioners. For such a scope it is necessary here to clarify how we approach the terms 'context' and 'situation'. Within the purview of this discussion, we see a relation between these two terms, where a situation is context with a particular evolving character in time, i.e. a situation is an aspect of a context but with evolving characteristic. By presenting our project in such a frame we wish to discuss and highlight to the RtD community how a situation within a particular context can transform as design agency. We present these two contributions, that of a genre for RtD, and the design agency emerging from a situation, by describing a personal field-based project which we undertook as our wedding in the format of a design performance, within an evolving context of the Indo-China border.

The presentation of this discussion is organized with the following flow. We begin by describing our reason for undertaking such a project, that of cross-cultural relation making, and the institutional support that we garnered for the project. Then we present the context of the project, the Indo-China border and its dynamic situation because of evolving geopolitical forces, which influenced our decisions and actions. We position and provide evidence from this situation as having design agency. Within this section we present and describe three design artefacts with varied characteristics but closely related with the personal relation making project as design outputs. Based on the three artefacts we will present a reflective discussion highlighting, firstly how the three artefacts are an output that were shaped by the context and the evolving situation at the Indo China political border and secondly of personal relation making events as a genre for RtD.

2. Designing Rituals for Cross Cultural Personal Relation Making

The walls of our home had heard many discussions of visas, permits and such bureaucratic procedures that had become part of our daily lives. As citizens from India and China we are political neighbours, while we cohabit as a couple in a third country (First in Finland,

when we undertook this project and now in Denmark). The distance from our countries of birth and its subsequent citizenry made us ponder on the political boundary between our neighbouring nations. While between India and China, our rituals, practices, food habits and languages vary, the two nations share a long political border that also separates along the Himalayas. This boundary as a political border is many places, practices and procedures. As field-based design practitioners, we conceptualized a performative project, with the aim to highlight the experience of this border for two cross-border citizens wishing to establish a personal relationship. For this we began by imagining to utilize the political and bureaucratic processes from both sides for weaving a wedding event at a border pass between India and China known as Nathula. The pass an offshoot of the old silk route had closed after a war in 1962 between the two nations and had reopened for trade in 2006. The procedures employed by the Chinese and Indian state, to reach the border check posts, for entry, document checks, stamping and the overseeing of these by the border control personnel along the border control were framed to be an integral part of our wedding ritual at Nathula on the Indo-China border.

By considering the political and bureaucratic border control processes as wedding rituals at the border for a symbolic union of two individuals, we aimed to inquire into new possibilities for the Indo-China border as a political boundary. While we acknowledged the procedures of structural division on the border site, we reframed them for a ritual of a personal alliance. On the one hand, the project wished to highlight the political processes and protocols necessary for individuals from India and China to reach the boundary to form a relation, on the other, we wished to subvert the procedures of structural division into new meanings of a personal alliance. With this we agreed that our wedding rituals would be both supported and constrained by a political border context. So, we began attributing agency to this context from the inception of the project. By staining a personal wedding of two cross-border citizens as an event of union event along a political border that divides and separates, the project through a personal relation-based design practice wished to seed a subversive coupling onto the Indo-China border.

With this background we made a proposal to the Kone art foundation call for projects in September 2016. As deliverables, we stated that the project's outcome would be a performative project with an output of a short documentary film, academic articles and a photo series to exhibit. In the proposal, we chose the wedding date to be the 6th of July, as this was to be the 11th anniversary of the reopening of Nathula Pass in 2017. With these elements, the proposal thus had a conceptual idea for a cross-border wedding as a performance, a location, the reasoning for a date of the performance, a set of deliverables and a broad plan. We were fortunate enough to receive the project grant for 2017, after which we started planning for performing the event at the Indo-China border. We began by trying to get in touch with relevant Indian and Chinese state authorities for permissions, contacted border research academics and also inquired with our personal contacts who might have had experiences working at or travelling to the Indo-China border. Having had varied responses from the authorities from both India and China we proceeded on reaching

the Indo-China border from either side of the two nations. We began our journey from our respective homes in India and China at the end of June 2017 and coordinated our journey to Nathula. We traced this journey towards Nathula extensively through notes, sketches, photographs, audio and video.

3. Context of the Wedding: Nathula Pass and a Military Standoff

India and China as neighbouring nations are largely separated by the Himalayas. They also share their borders with two mountain kingdom nations, wedged as buffering states, that of Nepal and Bhutan. A majority of the nearly 3488 km long Indo-China border remains disputed and contentious and the military from either side approaches the border through what is known as Line of Actual Control (LAC). There are three mountain passes along the Indo-China border Shipkila, Lipulekh and Nathula. Only licensed local traders from either side are permitted to cross these three passes, while along Lipulekh and Nathula, Hindu religious tourists from India are also permitted to reach to visit Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar in the Tibet Autonomous Region. For non-licensed Chinese citizens, Nathula is the only accessible pass for visiting, therefore we chose this as our wedding project venue (Figure 1). Having never visited the Indo-China border as Chinese and Indian citizens, our understanding of it as a possible place for our wedding started to form in patches. Old readings, from online sources of texts, images, videos and maps helped us gradually build up a repository of places through desk research.

Figure 1 The Indo-China political border with location of the Nathula Pass

Nathula pass is 4,310 meters above the mean sea level and is an offshoot of the ancient Silk Road trade route that connects Tibet and the plains of Bengal in India. This is the southern most of the three mountain passes. It can be seen as a military site, as a trade route for local businesses and then also as a transit point for Indian religious tourists (Panda, 2015). The closest large city from the Indian side to Nathula is Gangtok, the capital of the state of Sikkim, and from the Chinese side the closest administrative county is Yadong. Only Indian citizens are allowed to visit Gangtok without special permits and only Chinese citizens can visit Yadong. To reach the border check post at Nathula, special permits are required for the respective citizens on either side. Nathula was a legal point of entry for Indian citizens to enter the Tibetan Chinese side and the section along this pass was stable and a resolved border between India and China when compared to the two other passes. Of the three passes, the simplest one to reach from the Chinese side is also Nathula. These aspects made us also choose Nathula as a venue for our wedding as a design performance.

Historically, Nathula can be seen as a place of constantly evolving characteristics. Starting as a trade route, then as a military pass, then as a conduit for Tibetan refugees to move into India, next as a sealed border after the Indo-China war in 1962, in 2006 reopening as a trade pass again and finally becoming a point on a pilgrim route in 2015. The pass thus has been constantly transforming, gaining commercial, political, military and religious touristic characteristics. With our proposal for holding our wedding ceremony at Nathula, we wished to push the evolutionary characteristic of Nathula further, and induce a personal poetic signification of union onto the border by two ordinary citizens across the border.

3.1 The Doklam standoff

In order to perform an event as a wedding in Nathula, we contacted our respective state authorities to get permits to visit Nathula. This was part of the conception of wedding as a performance. With this the bureaucratic practices of citizenship document check, printing permission paper, stamping, control to enter and exit were framed as symbolic acts of providing permission and recognition to the couple to perform a wedding.

APPLICATION CUM PERMISSION TO VISIT NATHULA
(TO BE FILLED IN CAPITAL LETTERS IN DUPLICATE)

1. Permission may please be granted to the following Relative/Dependent/Guest of
No. 16-174616-H Rank 1st Lt Name Mr. [redacted]
Unit 1st Battalion To visit Nathu La on date 27 July 2017

Ser	Name	Guest/Relative	Sex	Age	Address
1	[redacted]		M	40	
2	[redacted]		M	39	
3	Karthikeya Satish		M	39	
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					

2. Following vehicle and drivers may also be permitted:
(a) Veh No. SK0120152 Driver Name B. Ramang DL NO. 13/14
(b) Veh No. Drivers Name DL NO.

3. Please produce this pass for making Vehicle permit From Sikkim Traffic Police Check Post (MG Marg/Mile-3)

4. It is certified that above mentioned pers do not suffer from any heart disease and are medically fit.

5. It is certified that all the above visitors for whom permission is sought are bonafide Indian citizens and that none of them are NR/Not from foreign country. It is further certified that all visitors will abide by any security areas convened by Army authorities. The pass is valid only on their way to Nathula post.

6. This pass is issued FREE OF COST.

7. This pass is issued FREE OF COST.

8. Issuing Authority
No. 16-174616-H (GSO 1 (P))
Unit: 1st Battalion
1st Group Major in Command
Main Nathu La Border area

9. This permit is non-transferable.

10. Monday & Tuesday are non Nathula days and no permits are issued. Permits issued on Mon & Tue due to exigencies will bear stamp of issuing authority and countersigned by Col GS. 17 Miles Post.

ARMY NATHULA PERMIT
Permit No. 77 DATE 27/7/17

通行证
公字第 000514 号
姓名 莫高斯 性别 男
出生日期 1988-03
民族 汉族
籍贯 浙江省嘉兴市桐乡市
职业 桐乡市消防大队
住址 浙江省嘉兴市桐乡市梧桐街道北联村5幢201室
前往地区 西藏昌都地区日喀则地区 亚东县 珠穆朗玛峰、拉萨
签发日期 2018-03
有效期 2018-03
备注 前往珠峰，必须经当地检查站。
K:00554108

Figure 2 The permits issued by border authorities from India and China enroute to Nathula Pass

And the certificates issued by the states got considered as symbolic artefacts of union as part of the wedding ritual (Figure 2). After gaining these permits we planned to hold a small ceremony that mixed Chinese and Indian rituals and exchange rings at the border to perform what we framed as a wedding ceremony at the border.

As we set out on the final stretch to meet and perform our wedding in the summer of 2017, there occurred the largest military build-up since 1962 across the Indo China border. This is a well-covered event by the Chinese, Indian and international media is known as the Doklam standoff (Shiseng, 2017; Taylor, 2017). What occurred then was on the 16th of June 2017, Chinese troops began building a road in Doklam, a plateaued region claimed by both Bhutan and China. This region is approximately 35 km away from Nathula. Right below Doklam is India's narrowest corridor of 17 km, which joins the North Eastern Indian states to the rest of India. Thus, India views any military access around this region with concern. India with its agreement and support to the Bhutanese military opposed this road building activity by the Chinese military troops and this caused a large military standoff between India and China. This lasted from mid-June 2017 till 27th August 2017. This conflict changed the normative border regulations. While in usual situations, Indian and Chinese citizens could visit Nathula from either side, during this period when we had already set on our journey to the venue of our wedding, a number of restrictions arose. By June end, the restrictions from the Chinese side resulted in a no entry to Nathula for all non-local Chinese citizens. On the 4th of July 2017, just one day before the bride reached Yadong, the Chinese administration also closed the access to border county of Yadong. This cross-border political event changed much of our wedding project plan at Nathula, and from then on, this particular border issue as a situation began shaping our project rather than our wedding changing the meaning of the border context.

The border wedding project timeline:

The interplay between personal and political events across China and India

Figure 3 The full timeline of the project, tracing personal and political events

4. The Indo-China border Situation as a Design Agent

As citizens of two neighbouring nations, our relationship is cross-cultural. Considering we have different nuptial rituals, we had taken the liberty of framing and designing our own wedding rituals such that it allowed us to inquire and integrate an element that separated us as citizens from two nations, the political border between India and China. As field-based design researchers, this aspect was at the root of our decision, to integrate a design project with a personal rite of passage event, transforming our wedding into performative field-based design (Figure 3). This integration by design of the political border for an event of personal union while can be seen as a subversive design act, it was also to question and inquire into the nature of a political border as a context. It is this aspect, of integrating inquiry through the design of a personal event is what we present to the design research community for a consideration as a discursive genre for RtD.

With that above as our first contribution through this paper, in this section, we will present the second contribution, three design outputs from our performative project at the Indo-China border. These outputs are presented as design objects and acts, also under the purview and interest of RtD. The three outputs are, a relation making design object, secondly the video documentation of a field-based performance design act, and thirdly a speculative (Dunne & Raby, 2014) architectural program. It is also important to consider the second output, the video of a performative design act, as a being a result of encountering a military standoff, and thus should be seen as design act that emerges as a result of the situation at

the border. Therefore, parts of this section reflect the larger political force of the border, and because of it reveals a situated response from us as design practitioners to the Doklam standoff in designing and performing our wedding at the border. This indicates how we addressed opportunities to challenge the constraints offered by the situation at border. It is this which makes the situation at the political border to be seen by us as having design agency. With this background we present three design artefacts shaped by the Indo-China political border.

The first refers to the design of personal jewellery relating to the nuptial ritual, the wedding rings. The second design outcome is a short film that documented the wedding 'in the absence of the other' in two places separated by the conflict at the border. Thirdly, based on our reflections and learning from the field-based design project, we introduce and propose an architectural program for politically contentious borders calling for places of varied architectural scales to accommodate cross-border weddings. Considering a RtD framing and interest we have consciously chosen these three artefacts for the discussion here. As design objects the three outputs are of varied characteristics and mediums. The first is a relational jewellery, the second is a film of a performance and the third is an architectural concept. The common thread though is that all three of these as design outputs can be considered to be shaped through us as designers because of our encountering the context/situation of the political divide of the Indo-China border. Furthermore, the forces of the political border that have shaped these three design objects also vary in character. We identify the characteristics of design agential forces of the border that shape the three artefacts as Profile, Politics and Potential respectively. With this we present this context/situation of the political border as a design agent provisioning agency within this project. Next in the coming sub-sections, we describe these three design outputs in order.

*4.1 Wedding Rings: **Profile** shaped as the Indo-China border*

Rings have evolved to become an integral element of a conjugal relation-making process in many different cultures. It is almost a universal indication that a person wearing a ring on a particular finger is in a relationship. The ring wearing practice indicates a symmetrical relationship, which is, if a person wears a ring, on a particular finger, then it is plausible that one's partner is wearing one or has at least also received one. We wanted our wedding rings to relate and be part of our performative project at the Indo-China border.

Figure 4 The Wedding rings shaped by the profile of Indo-China border along Nathula Pass

The many hours spent looking at Nathula and the line that pronounced the border on the online maps led us to shape our wedding rings along a scaled geographical boundary line that separates India and China at Nathula. We sketched and modelled a number of possibilities to arrive at a design where the edge profile of two rings showed a scaled down geographical line of the Indo China border at Nathula (Figure 4). Thus, when the rings are not worn, they can be combined together, showing the border between India and China at Nathula. This also means that one ring's profile represents the Indian side and the other ring, represents the Chinese side. We decided that as a couple, we wear rings that represent not our own country but the other's. Therefore, the Chinese person's ring holds a landform of the Indian side and the Indian has of Chinese landform on the ring. This decision, allows a symbolizing of a material exchange of Indo-China border landforms through the bride and groom's rings of a wedding at the Indo China border. With this, we also decided to invest a special meaning of the border into our relationship announcing wedding rings. The rings were made to order in gold to an Indian jeweller. These were partly handmade and partly done using a CNC dye making machine, to get the exact profile of a jagged geography of Nathula Pass. They were crafted by the jeweller who transferred a digital drawing given by us, onto a metal dye profile and later onto a gold plate to get the accurate profile of the Indian and the Chinese side. Both the rings were carried by the groom by wearing them throughout the journey to the border. These border profiled rings as design objects played an important role during the project, that of communicating the project's intent during the journey to the border. The design concept that integrated the border within its profile and form, its physical manifestation, and them being wedding rings indicated a weighted intent of the project. When the groom encountered an administrative doorkeeper, such as a government official or military personnel then the project intent would be communicated by showing the rings and clarifying the concept. This helped in opening up a lot of bureaucratic and administrative doors thus helping in reaching the border from the Indian side. This aspect of a design concept, of using the border profile and its manifestation as wedding rings, not only facilitated in communicating about the project but also helped in reaching the

Indo China border. Such a personal intent and a clear design concept manifested as a well-crafted object, thus, became a reasonable tool to open doors to the border even through a situation of a military build-up at the border. Thus, this aspect of the border's 'profile' is the most rudimentary way with which we attribute design agency to the political border, through its scaled manifestation on wedding rings as relation making objects.

*4.2 A Border Wedding: **Politics** puts Performing Rituals within a Screen*

Our original plan was to gather all the necessary bureaucratic permits to reach Nathula from either sides of the border and then hold a small ceremony together. For this particular event we had gathered and interpreted Hindu and Chinese wedding traditions and rituals. We were prepared with particular ritual practices from both sides that symbolized the rites of union, supposed to be performed by the groom and bride together. These were an equal mix from both Indian and Chinese traditions choreographed as mixed rituals that could be performed as a cross cultural relation making event. This event was where we were supposed to meet and exchange rings. The political situation between the two nations resulting in military stand-off did not allow us to meet. This dramatic evolution in character of the border as an overtly political context reinforced by the military complex and its ability to shape our decisions became most evident at this point. To overcome this complex political context, we chose the route of cinematography. With this tactic, we performed the same set of rituals that we were prepared with in the absence of the other and in two separate places. We recorded the performances on video, and merged them on the screen through video editing (Figure 5). In this manner the ceremony was performed in two places on the 10th of July 2017, the Indian part at the Takshe residential school run by a Buddhist community in Gangtok by the groom and two of his friends, while the Chinese part was carried out on a mountain behind Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in Rikaze by the bride and three of her friends. We performed a coordinated set of same interpretive ritualistic practices in the absence of the other: we enacted exchanging a flower bouquet and garland; crossed lines, performed libation, the act of pouring and receiving ritualistic liquids, received and wore rings but through a red thread, bowed, and walked, all in the absence of the other half. We coordinated and documented these acts as a performance using video in both places. In this process, it was the camera that replaced the position of the other half. Then later after we got back together, we collaborated, designed and edited, merging the video footages from both sides, realizing sequences of rituals of union on the screen, as our wedding event. We took this route only because of the political situation between our two countries prevented us from meeting each other and performing our conception of wedding at the border.

Figure 5 Stills of the merging of wedding rituals on the screen from the wedding video

4.3 Wedding Venues on Borders: *Potential* for an Architectural Program

The final outcome as a design act is a speculative design proposal for an architectural program for politically contentious borders. As field-based design researchers from neighbouring countries, who inquired into a border through our performative wedding, our call is for political boundaries to house and facilitate a union of cross-border citizens and cultures than separate. Towards this we propose the potential of wedding venues of varying architectural scales on political borders where these places allow cross culture and border citizens to gather and form familial relations. Being located on separating political borders these wedding venues could still follow the necessary protocols of border control and passage, but in between they are made and designed for rites, rituals and practices of a union. As a potential architectural program, these venues could be small pavilions, to a wedding hall, to the size of a hotel or even at the scale of a neighbourhood or larger, but all located on political borders. One can imagine such edifices on currently politically contentious borders, for instance, a pavilion at the Nathula Pass on the Indo-China border, a wedding hall on the North and South Korea demilitarized zone, a Trump wedding hotel on the US-Mexico wall or a large wedding complex along the banks of the Shatt al-Arab on the Iraq-Iran border. Such a type of an edifice for familial cross border and cultural unions could house the gathering of two different cultures, with the potential of bringing together and mixing food habits, clothing, religion, languages and even architectural elements while indicating for a resolution of political differences across borders. With this proposal, we suggest that such an architectural place within it holds potential to symbolically evolve embodying the ritual of a union itself (Figure 6).

Figure 6 *Imagining the space between the Indo-China border gates at Nathula as a wedding venue*

5. Discussion

We performed our wedding in the absence of the other, at the Indo-China border during the Doklam standoff which had the biggest military build-up along the border since 1962. The consequences and characteristics of our wedding as a field-based design project was influenced, conditioned and shaped by the context/situation of the Indo-China border. We have provided evidence of this shaping through three different design outputs from the project that are closely related to the design performance. Through these objects we have also identified and articulated the nature of forces that have shaped these objects, and term them as profile, politics and potential. With these characteristics we attribute agency to the context/situation of the political border. To further iterate, as we reached closer to the border the experience of our political identities became more pronounced, but we let our design practitioner identities be influenced and shaped by the context/situation of the political border and perform our wedding in the absence of the other half. We see this aspect of our wedding performed in the absence of the other as being a reflection not of our personal relationship, but a reflection of our respective political identities. So, the performance of our wedding at the border, as a micro event undertaken by a Chinese and an Indian citizen, indicated the nature of the relationship that was prevalent then between the political states of India and China. This is also what we wish to indicate with our performance as a design act.

Then by framing our wedding as a personal relation making project, our aim is to contribute to the RtD community to highlight field-based performance as a genre of RtD. This approach

considered the relationship between us, two design practitioners, who as cross border citizens performed an event symbolizing our wedding as an inquiry along a political border. With this, we deliberated our design practice and our wedding as a personal relationship making event, to fuse. There ceased to be a separation between a personal event and the use of design for performing a personal political commentary as respective citizens. This particular fused characteristic of our performance, when undertaken at the context of the border, integrated inquiry through the design of a personal event. This is what we present to the design research community for a consideration as a discursive genre for RtD.

Such an approach of fusing design practice and personal events and allowing this fusion to not only make a political comment but also as a personal relationship-based inquiry provisions design practice to engage into larger political events. But this also has its consequences. Unexpected turn of events, the risk of being suspected by state authorities and even fellow citizens, loss of control over planning, general uncertainty and many unexpected turns were situations that we faced when carrying out this project. These aspects indeed have implications at a personal and professional level. Yet such a fusion also allowed us to push our boundaries at a personal, professional and also at political identity levels. Thus, our RtD practice by facilitating the conception of such a fusion provisioned a change at personal, professional and political levels.

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