

The Social Lives of Rare Earths

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Abstract

How do critical minerals change Burma? And how is Burma “changing” critical minerals? Recently, the worldwide struggle over rare earths has brought rare worldwide attention onto the borderland between Burma (Myanmar), China, and India. There, hundreds of mines in sparsely populated hills and valleys are the main source of “the most critical” heavy rare earth elements—terbium and dysprosium—for Chinese producers, for humankind, and for Beijing’s struggle against Washington, Brussels, New Delhi, and Tokyo. Diverse researchers, journalists, activists, and policymakers have highlighted the world’s dependence on these secretive mines, but also nearby toxic pollution, military dictatorship, war, and criminal companies. This article draws on ethnographic field research and interviews among ethnic Kachin people in these borderlands during 2010–2026. It explores how the rare-earth mining boom has shaped the Burma–China–India borderland and its multi-ethnic society, focusing on diverse inter-ethnic conflicts, China–Kachin–Burma–India relations, armed revolutionary governance, environmentalist struggles, and people’s livelihoods in a vast local economy of natural resources under the rule of militaries. The article shows how several borderland struggles over ethnicity, ideology, money, and ecology are shaping the current rare earths boom and international controversy.