

The Salween Border as Productive, Differentiated Space: Protection, Precarity, and Pollution

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Abstract

The Salween River border between Thailand and Myanmar increasingly functions as a productive space that simultaneously generates protection and crisis, refuge and precarity. Rather than simply regulating flows or providing humanitarian shelter, borders actively produce differentiated outcomes through mechanisms operating across multiple registers that do not align spatially or functionally. This ongoing project, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in adjacent and emerging Thai and Myanmar-side settlements, explores how the border produces interconnected dynamics.

First, strategic displacement: following the 2021 coup, new Karen settlements positioned along the Myanmar riverbank leverage proximity to Thailand for security while maintaining autonomy from formal camps, building resilient infrastructure rather than temporary shelters. Second, hierarchical inclusion: documentation status creates profound differentiation within shared territory, determining access to services, livelihoods, and political voice. Third, fragmented governance: overlapping authorities (Thai state, KNU territorial control, customary leaders) enable cross-border movement and trade while generating legal uncertainty and uneven protection. Emerging river contamination from upstream mining further illustrates the border's productivity most clearly: pollution crosses the territorial boundary creating shared ecological impact, yet profoundly different experiences emerge through differentiated knowledge, capacity to respond, and governing authorities seeking to address (or ignore) the crisis.

We explore how understanding humanitarian borders requires attending to how they produce connection and differentiation, protection and precarity, through the same interconnected processes. The border generates possibilities (refuge, economic networks, autonomous settlement) and constraints (legal exclusion, hierarchical access, environmental vulnerability) simultaneously - not as contradictions but as mutually constitutive outcomes of the productive border.