

The Paradox of the State's Governmentality of Spatiality and Temporality in Cross-Border Pollution in the Energy Transition Era: Case Studies of the Kok, Sai, Ruak Mekong, and Kraburi

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Abstract

Drawing on first-hand experience in environmental activism addressing heavy metal contamination across the Kok, Sai, Ruak, and Mekong rivers since April 2024, this paper reveals the fundamental paradoxes of state governmentality in managing transboundary pollution during the global energy transition. It critically questions why state agencies produce deeply contradictory narratives and public guidance for residents in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. On one hand, the state consistently asserts through official discourses that heavy metal levels in drinking water, crops, and aquatic life remain within "safe permissible limits." On the other hand, the same state issues warnings advising citizens to avoid consuming water, plants, and animals from high-risk areas. I argue that this governmental paradox stems from the state's attempt to assert power-knowledge techniques over the spatiality and temporality of a "slow violence"—an incremental, unseen toxic harm that unfolds gradually across borderland ecosystems. The state employs scientific measurement tools to quantify toxicity against standard criteria as pollutants travel through space, while utilizing high-frequency monitoring to pacify the public and obscure this slow violence. However, the state realizes it cannot govern the spatiality and temporality of mining operations in Myanmar, which lie beyond its territorial sovereignty. Furthermore, the state recognizes that as heavy metals quietly accumulate over time, this slow violence expands spatially, entrenching generational risks and prolonging environmental recovery. Ultimately, this state paradox leads to a loss of governance legitimacy over space and time. Rather than pacifying the population, it empowers local civic movements to expose the hidden dynamics of slow violence, challenge state-centric logic, and actively participate in reconstructing alternative public knowledge regarding transboundary pollution.