

Border Infrastructure and Materiality: Cross-border Trade and Tin-Tungsten in Transit in Kayah State Frontiers

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Abstract

Around May 2024, people witnessed the arch 'Welcome to the Karenni State' erected at the border checkpoint in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand. It signified the power seized by the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force against the military in the eastern Salween River zone. The fragmented sovereignty exercised by the Myanmar Army in this frontier existed before the 2021 coup, yet both Thailand and Myanmar had promoted regional cooperation. The construction of state buildings, the expansion of roads, and the erection of a steel bridge across the Salween River were evidence. After the coup, in addition to humanitarian aid flows and the influx of displaced people crossing into Thailand amid ceaseless fighting, certain commodities continued to be transported across the border to Thailand. Framed by border infrastructure and materiality, this article traces specific commodities that have been transferred between two countries; one significant commodity is tin-tungsten produced by a Myanmar state-owned mining company. This mining site, which dates back to the British colonial era, is located in Mawchi, Hpasawng Township, on the west bank of the Salween River, where the Myanmar Army could claim firmer sovereignty until late November 2023. Cross-border mineral trade is significantly supported by the Thai state, with its customs rules allowing tin-tungsten to be traded and cross into countries such as China and Malaysia. Meanwhile, authorizing the use of main roads and large vehicles for transportation on the Thai side has drawn criticism of the state's promotion of such trade, which was deemed inappropriate given Thailand's local geographical and ecological conditions in national park zones. Flows of mineral trade through this area, hence exercising power over humans to sustain trade amid the civil wars, while infrastructure through roads and the bridge realizes the multiplicities of actors, and actants move the Thai bureaucratic system to play roles.