

Hope(s) amid Wartime Border-crossing

Zhuo Niu

Abstract

Since the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has entered an era of protracted armed conflict, state fragmentation, and economic collapse. These are conditions that have driven unprecedented cross-border mobility to neighboring countries. This paper draws on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork (2024) in Ruili, the largest land port on the China–Myanmar border. Once defined by porous flows and vibrant cross-border exchange, Ruili has in recent years been re-fortified through intensified surveillance and infrastructure transformation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite tightening governance, the city remains home to a substantial population of Myanmar migrants whose lives are suspended between two national orders.

Within this shifting border regime, I examine how Myanmar migrants negotiate hope amid wartime uncertainty at home and mobility restrictions in China. I argue that their future-making practices are shaped and mediated by two intertwined modalities of hope. The first is transitive and grounded in everyday survival: securing employment, sending remittances, maintaining legal status, and sustaining cross-border livelihoods. The second is intransitive and oriented toward Myanmar's collective political horizon, specifically, imaginaries of democracy mediated by the People's Defense Forces (PDFs). These political developments circulate transnationally through digital media and migrant networks, enabling hope to travel across borders and sustain a sense of political community in exile.

By tracing how personal aspirations become entangled with national imaginaries, the paper proposes a "continuum of hope" that links intimate life projects with broader visions of democratic transformation. Situating borderland migrants not as passive victims but as active participants in Myanmar's evolving political future, the study reveals how wartime mobility reshapes both political imagination and everyday practice at the frontier.