

Sequential State–ngo Synchronization: State Capacity, Civil Society, and Border Governance on the China–myanmar Frontier

Tianlong You and Yiran Tian

Abstract

This paper investigates the evolving relationship between the Chinese state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) through the case of Ruili, a county-level city on the China-Myanmar frontier. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and extensive archival records, we develop an analytical framework of synchronization for the Chinese state and NGOs to capture how the relationship between them has changed. The analysis identifies four stages: a compensatory phase, in which foreign NGOs filled governance gaps and nurtured local capacity; a parallel growth phase, in

which domestic NGOs and local governments expanded activities together; an alignment phase, in which NGOs reoriented themselves to implement national strategies such as rural revitalization and public health security; and a global outreach phase, in which selected NGOs extended their services abroad within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). We present a case in which a welfare NGO working on cross-border social problems developed its operations alongside local state agencies. This paper contributes to current debates on the adaptation of Chinese NGOs to a new environment by showing how co-production, strategic alignment, and bounded negotiation have unfolded over time in a politically sensitive frontier setting.