

Between Extraction and Negotiation: The Myanmar Gem Merchants Association and Brokered Governance on the China-Myanmar Border

Fangliang Zhang

Abstract

In this article, I explore how brokers emerge and operate in a border regime not organized through NGO or humanitarian infrastructures, with particular attention to how the Myanmar Gem Merchants Association mediated between migrant commerce, community life, and local state governance in Ruili, a major China–Myanmar border city. Building on David Mosse’s work on development brokers, I introduce the concept of commercial-development brokerage to extend the analysis of brokerage from aid-funded development projects to state-managed projects of border commercial development. The concept describes how migrant merchant organizations mediate between local state agendas of economic growth, migrant community governance, and market order.

Drawing on ethnographic research on Myanmar jade traders and foreigner communities in Ruili, this article asks: Why did the China–Myanmar border produce a merchant association as a broker within local development governance, rather than an NGO-based or humanitarian intermediary? What migrant needs and problems did the association render visible, negotiable, and administratively manageable, including livelihood, residence, education, religious life, commercial disputes, market regulation, and public order? How did the association make its authority legible and useful to both migrant communities and local state actors?

I argue that the Myanmar Gem Merchants Association emerged from the intersection of jade commerce, co-national employment relations, migrant settlement, religious networks, and local state’s project of border economic development. Its brokerage was both extractive and negotiative: it drew authority from market hierarchy and community dependence, while helping stabilize the migrant economy, manage a culturally and legally distinct migrant population, and sustain Ruili’s commercial border order. By comparing this case with NGO- and Camp-in-Charge-based brokerage in the Bangladesh–Myanmar borderlands, the article shows that development brokers are not only produced in humanitarian or aid-dependent spaces. They also emerge in commercially dense borderlands where local states pursue economic development while governing mobile and legally ambiguous populations.