

PANEL

Transformative Politics and Multiplicities in Dynamics: Trade, Investment, and Infrastructure Development in the Myanmar Frontiers

Convener

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Panel Description

Encompassing the Myanmar frontiers, where underground trade, transnational investment, and flows of illicit and illegal economies have long been present, this panel seeks to highlight how cross-border activities by different actors have transformatively strengthened since the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Flows of trade, investment, and infrastructure have taken new forms, reshaping commodity transactions, capital accumulation, and relationships among multiple actors and actants, with varying effects on communities on both Thailand's and Myanmar's borders. This panel is conceptualized at the intersection of politics and multiplicities, exemplifying Myanmar, whose protracted fragmentation of sovereignty has led to the establishment of different polities, each accumulating power to control specific areas, especially those along its borders with neighboring countries. In the meantime, their power consolidation is driven by economic factors promoted through cross-border trade and foreign transnational investment, especially in agriculture and energy production, leading to infrastructure development such as roads, dams, land clearance for plantations, and entertainment complexes in grey zones.

Our panel sees politics along the Myanmar frontiers as dynamically transformative, shaped by evolving political circumstances after the 2021 Coup and an opportunistic political economy, which in turn are reshaped by states and bureaucracy, and new forms of cooperation between formerly ethnic organizations opposing the Myanmar regime. The coexistence of politics' consolidation in both spatial dominance and capital accumulation has led to multiple movements and consequences, as well as effects on communities and the responses they elicit. The Myanmar frontiers have therefore evolved into sites of multiplicities.

This panel chose three Myanmar frontiers connecting Thailand's borders: one in Shan State, bordering Chiang Rai Province; another in Kayah/Karenni State, connecting Mae Hong Son Province; and the last in Kayin/Karen State, connecting Tak Province. These three frontiers demonstrate that cross-border trade, ranging from teak, cattle, minerals, to consumer products, has played an important role for more than half a century. It historically included the underground economy in Mae Sot and other border districts of Tak, which supported the economy and livelihoods of people in the Kayin/Karen state during the civil war. Medium- and long-distance trade has driven the mobility, migration, and settlement of people from Myanmar to the Thai border since the 1970s, as witnessed across all three

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frontiers. Transnational investment in Myanmar has been projected through multiple mega projects, such as dam construction and gas transport, including rare earth mining, funded by Chinese entrepreneurs in Shan State, and the one in the Karenni/ Kayah established by the Myanmar government to transport products to other countries such as China, Thailand, and Malaysia. The growing economic projects have, meanwhile, shaped and reshaped the polities' power dominance and consolidation in each frontier into a multiplicity of effects and consequences. The Thai state, at both the central and local levels, has employed various measures, including policy implementation and support for the bureaucratic system. Not only from the above power, but also from communities affected by trade, investment, and infrastructure development along Myanmar's frontiers. The impacts of such projects have led to a multiplicity of movements and negotiations.