

PANEL

Migration, Mobility and Governance along the China-Myanmar Border

Convener

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Panel Description

This panel seeks to explore the dynamic and often contested spaces along the China-Myanmar borderlands, with a focus on how migration and mobility shape—and are shaped by—social, political, and ecological landscapes. In the context of Myanmar's ongoing crisis and transformation, border regions have emerged as critical sites of negotiation, survival, and resistance. They are not only zones of conflict and displacement but also spaces of everyday life, economic exchange, and transnational solidarity. Rather than treating the border as a fixed territorial line, this panel conceptualises it as a lived arena where state sovereignty is constantly performed, contested, and circumvented by diverse actors—including migrant communities, civil society organisations, digital networks, informal economic brokers, and semi-autonomous merchant associations. The panel brings together four distinct yet interconnected inquiries that collectively reframe our understanding of migration, governance, and illicit economies along the frontier. The first contribution examines Community Building and Online Connection among Burmese People in China, focusing on how digital platforms enable displaced populations to maintain social cohesion, negotiate belonging, and navigate the challenges of life in a foreign regulatory environment. It argues that virtual spaces have become critical extensions of physical border landscapes, facilitating both emotional support and practical survival strategies in the absence of formal integration mechanisms. The second paper, Sequential State–NGO Synchronization, analyses the evolving relationship between state capacity and civil society on the China-Myanmar frontier. Proposing a novel model of sequential synchronisation, it explains how NGOs and state actors alternately align, diverge, and re-coordinate in response to shifting border governance priorities—particularly in humanitarian assistance, public health, and disaster relief—revealing a more nuanced picture of state–civil society relations than conventional antagonism or co-optation frameworks allow. The third theme, Framing the Antagonists, investigates the cultural thickness and semiotic shifts surrounding the Northern Myanmar online scam industry. Moving beyond simplistic narratives of criminality, this paper unpacks how scammers, victims, and enforcers are culturally framed across different media ecologies—from local gossip networks to national news to transnational anti-fraud campaigns. It demonstrates how moral boundaries are drawn, blurred, and redrawn along ethnic and national lines, and how these framing practices themselves shape migration decisions and border mobility patterns. Finally, Between Extraction and Negotiation turns to the Myanmar Gem Merchants Association as a case study in brokered governance. This paper examines how merchant associations function as intermediary authorities, negotiating between state extraction pressures (tariffs, licensing, border controls) and local trading

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realities (credit networks, ethnic loyalties, cross-border kinship). It argues that such brokered arrangements produce an informal yet highly effective system of border economic governance that operates alongside, and often in tension with, formal state institutions. Collectively, these papers argue that understanding the present crisis and transformation of the China-Myanmar border requires moving beyond static notions of territory or simple dichotomies of legality and illegality. Instead, we must attend to the entangled domains of digital community-building, state–civil society synchronisation, cultural framing of illicit economies, and broker-mediated governance.