

PANEL

The Past and Present of the China-Myanmar Border: Mobility, Morality, and Historical Transformation

Convener

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Panel Description

This panel re-examines the China-Myanmar borderland as a layered, contested, and persistently generative space where historical legacies and contemporary crises converge. Moving beyond static notions of territory and sovereignty, it foregrounds four interconnected analytical axes: cross-border migration networks, invisible ethnic mobility, colonial opium governance, and precolonial tributary exchange. By bridging micro-historical case studies with structural analysis, the panel aims to denaturalise the border as a mere geopolitical line and instead reveal it as a lived arena of negotiation, survival, and asymmetrical power. The first theme, *Regained and Lost*, investigates refugee reproduction within cross-border migration networks among Myanmar's highland ethnic groups. It asks how protracted conflict and displacement simultaneously generate new kinship-based solidarities and expose refugees to precarious, often exploitative, mobility regimes along the Sino-Myanmar frontier. The second theme, *Invisible Migration and Incredible Mobility*, rethinks conventional models of chain migration by focusing on minority migrants moving across China, Laos, and Myanmar. It argues that seemingly erratic or illegible movement patterns embody sophisticated strategies of risk management, challenging state-centric categories of illegality and integration. The third theme adopts a historical institutional lens, examining Britain's Responses and Measures to Opium Import from Yunnan, China to Myanmar in the Late 19th Century. This paper traces how colonial governance navigated the tension between moral regulation and revenue extraction, revealing the deep entanglements between highland opium economies and the formalisation of border controls. The fourth theme reaches deeper into the precolonial past, analysing the cross-cultural exchange in the China-Burma Borderland during the 14th–19th Century. It demonstrates that long before modern demarcation, the borderland functioned through flexible, hierarchical systems of ritualised exchange, which continue to resonate in contemporary cross-border ethnic identities. Together, these four papers move between scales—from bodily migration to imperial policy—and across temporal strata. The panel contends that the past of the China-Myanmar border is not a prologue but an active, recursively mobilised force. Understanding its present requires recovering the historical architectures of movement, governance, and exchange that have always exceeded the nation-state's framing.