Modern Asian Studies **56,** 2 (2022) pp. 471–503. © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0026749X21000755

*Border Governance: Reframing political transition in Myanmar**

KIRSTEN McCONNACHIE

University of East Anglia
Email: k.mcconnachie@uea.ac.uk

ELAINE LYNN-EE HO

National University of Singapore
Email: elaine.ho@nus.edu.sg

HELENE MARIA KYED

Danish Institute for International Studies
Email: hmk@diis.dk

Abstract

Borderlands and bordering processes are central to politics and the governance of people, goods, and territories, not only as markers of territorial-administrative control but also as practices that shape the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, mobility/immobility, and relations of power and authority. This special issue focuses on Myanmar, where political governance is deeply entangled with ethnicity, territory, borders, and bordering processes. We attempt to untangle these relationships by adopting an approach that combines consideration of how borderlands are governed with recognition of the ways in which borders, borderlands, and border populations shape governance and administration. We define this approach as 'border governance', by which we mean *governance in, of, and*

* This special issue has been developed from papers presented at a workshop on Border Governance in Myanmar, held at the University of Warwick in April 2018. Many thanks to the Warwick School of Law for supporting the workshop, and to all the participants for their contributions. Thanks also to Amanda Snellinger for her assistance at an early stage in this project, to Ludek Stavinoha and Brendan Whitty for comments on earlier drafts, and to Olivia Hammershøy and Rune Korgaard for proofreading and formatting assistance in the final stages.

through borderlands. In this introduction, we explore the meaning and significance of border governance as it relates to Myanmar, its ethnic border states, and their relations to other nations bordering the country. In doing so, we engage with and develop scholarly debates in three primary areas: (i) Borders, territoriality, and bordering processes; (ii) Plural governance and everyday bordering; (iii) Peacebuilding and the borders of transition. The articles in this special issue were written prior to the military coup of February 2021. Nevertheless, the central arguments presented here remain relevant, as does our conclusion: to achieve lasting peace in Myanmar, the borderlands must be at the centre.

Introduction

Borderlands and bordering processes are central to politics and the governance of people, goods, and territories, not only as markers of territorial-administrative control but also as practices that shape dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, mobility/immobility, and relations of power and authority.[1] This special issue focuses on Myanmar, where political governance is deeply entangled with ethnicity, territory, borders, and bordering processes. We attempt to untangle these relationships by adopting an approach that combines consideration of how borderlands are governed with recognition of the ways in which borders, borderlands, and border populations shape governance and administration. We define this approach as 'border governance', by which we mean *governance in, of, and through borderlands*.

This special issue, like the country itself, has been deeply affected by the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021 and dramatically changed the direction of the country's politics. The articles for this special issue were written before the coup occurred and reflected on Myanmar's political situation prior to the general election of November 2020. That election returned 920 seats for the National League for Democracy (NLD) (from a total of 1,117 available) and only 71 seats for

[1] Some key contributions from the vast literature in border studies include: Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson (eds), *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg Books, 2001); Henk van Houtum 'The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries', *Geopolitics*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2005, pp. 672–679; Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, 'Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective', *Geopolitics*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2005, pp. 633–649; Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Critical Border Studies: Broadening and Deepening the "Lines in the Sand" Agenda', *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, pp. 727–733; Anssi Paasi, 'Border Studies Reanimated: Going Beyond the Territorial/Relational Divide', *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 44, no. 10, 2012, pp. 2303–2309.

members of the military-backed Union Solidary and Development Party. This was sufficient to grant the NLD a majority in both the upper and lower houses of Parliament, even with the 25 per cent of seats in both chambers reserved for military appointees under the terms of the 2008 Constitution. The election results were disputed by the military, culminating in the shocking seizure of power in February 2021. In the first hours of the coup, leading NLD politicians and activists were arrested, including Aung San Suu Kyi. By November 2021, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners had documented 1,260 people murdered by the junta and 7,251 detained since the coup began. The military has deployed extreme violence across the country, but particularly in the border states. The people of Myanmar have responded to the coup with a massive campaign of resistance, coordinated as a Civil Disobedience Movement. A government-in-exile, the National Unity Government, has been formed by deposed parliamentarians together with other political activists. Resistance continues but hopes of a quick reversal to the coup have faded. As we finalize this issue, our thoughts are with colleagues and friends in Myanmar.

The events of 2021 cast our analyses in a new light—but it is one that underscores rather than undermines our key lines of argument. We began work on this special issue at a point of reflection after almost a decade of political reforms that had generated opportunities for some but created new risks and threats for others. We were concerned that Myanmar's politics were being driven internally and interpreted internationally through a narrow analytical and policy lens that largely ignored or underestimated the importance of the country's borderlands. We wanted to add nuance to that perspective by showing the many ways in which borders and borderlands are vitally important to understanding Myanmar's political past, present, and future. We sought to bring to view the physical territories at the edge of the state as well as the bordering processes that create international and internal borders, exemplified physically, symbolically, and in embodied ways through the identities inscribed on particular ethnic or religious groups. Our goal was to reframe an understanding of political action in Myanmar with a recognition that true political transformation would necessitate negotiating borders in myriad ways. These lines of enquiry and argument are even more urgent in the context of the military coup and its aftermath.

The decade between 2011–2021 was a time of rapid change for Myanmar, under the umbrella of an ostensible 'triple transition': from

military rule to a democratically elected government; from a centrally planned to a market-based economy; and a peace process between the government and multiple ethnic armed organizations. These processes attracted massive external investment and attention but they were analysed primarily in relation to the 'centre', including national-level actors and policies in Naypyidaw (the official capital and seat of the national Parliament) and Yangon (formerly the political centre and still the economic hub of Myanmar).[2] Of course, national politics are an important site of study, not least because centrist policies establish the terms under which other processes must operate: Myanmar's 2008 Constitution is a prime example of this.[3] Nevertheless, focusing solely or even primarily on national-level actors produces an understanding of politics and governance that is partial and incomplete. It reinforces a perception of centres of power where decisions are made, juxtaposed with remote borderlands of limited political significance. Most importantly, focusing on the decisions and preferences of the central state risks missing the political reality of Myanmar's supposed transition, namely that the narrative of success and transition was experienced by many as a time of continuing (and often escalating) violence, conflict, and persecution. This violence was not hidden. Atrocities committed against Rohingya in particular made headline news worldwide. Nevertheless, these and other acts of violence in borderlands (such as the aerial bombardment of civilians in Kachin, Shan, Rakhine, and Chin states, or the repeated violation of ceasefire agreements in Karen state) did little to diminish governmental or international commitment to the official narrative of peacebuilding and transition. This narrative held fast until the very moment of the coup, intensifying the shock of that event and all that has followed. However, as our articles demonstrate, the narrative of transition was always, at best, a thin veil drawn over continued inequality, discrimination, and oppression in Myanmar, much of it defined along centre/borderland lines.

The primary focus of border studies to date has been international boundaries and their effects on political and sociological processes such as identity, mobility, and security. Myanmar's international borders are

[2] Melissa Crouch and Tim Lindsey (eds), *Law, Society and Transition in Myanmar* (London: Hart, 2014); Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (eds), *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012); Nehginpao Kipgen, *Myanmar: A Political History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[3] See Melissa Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar: A Contextual Analysis* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2019).

extensive, stretching more than 6,500 km from the coastal estuary of the Naf River in Bangladesh, past northeast India, China, and Laos, and abutting Thailand down to the Kra Isthmus on the Malay peninsula. These 'interstate boundaries'[4] establish Myanmar's parameters and political relationships as a nation-state. Myanmar's relationships with its neighbours are often challenging, not least when it comes to navigating the power and interests of the region's superpowers—India and China.

However, it is not only international boundaries that influence political choices and national identity. Myanmar's internal borders have also been extremely important in shaping the country's political history and particularly its recent decades of armed conflict, violence, and persecution of minority ethnic groups. Myanmar is administratively divided into seven 'Regions' in the centre of the territory where the majority population is ethnic Bamar, surrounded by seven 'States' where the majority population is another ethnic group: Rakhine state, Chin state, Kachin state, Shan state, Kayin state, Kayah state, and Mon state.[5] These ethnic states are constructed around bounded identities related to ethnicity, religion, and language, but despite their official titles they are not ethnically or institutionally homogenous. They are populated by diverse ethnic groups and contain competing militias and militaries as well as ethnic armed organizations.

Myanmar's complex ethnic composition has been subject to many attempts at classification and categorization over many years. The British colonial administration in Burma 'first established the modern state as a racial hierarchy'[6] through well-used divide-and-rule tactics of governance. The efforts of colonial administrators to define Burma's constituent groups and to fix identities were continued by post-colonial administrations, notably through the concept of 'national races' (*taingyintha*). In recent years, this fixation on citizenship and belonging has been at its most extreme in the official rejection of Rohingya identity and insistence on characterizing Rohingya as 'Bengali'. However, these recent manifestations of identity politics are based on a long-standing and deeply entrenched reification of ethnic, racial, and religious group identities,

[4] George Gavrilis, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[5] Article 9 of Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008) changed the administrative designation of these areas from Divisions to Regions.

[6] Thant Myint-U, *A Hidden History of Burma* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), p. 14.

which dates back to (at least) the British colonial administration's comprehensive mode of state-bureaucratic bordering.[7]

In this introduction, we have chosen to use the term 'ethnic border states' when referring to the administrative territories recognized by the Myanmar state and 'borderlands' when speaking about these regions in a way that is not necessarily coterminous with the existing administrative boundaries. We recognize that the term 'ethnic border states' risks simplifying identities or reproducing conceptions of ethnicity that were manipulated by colonial administrators and remain contested today. However, by centring the concepts of ethnicity and border location, we are not merely following government terminology but also reflecting the approach preferred by many borderland residents. A similar dilemma occurs with the use of 'Burma' or 'Myanmar'. The name 'Burma' was imposed during colonial rule, while 'Myanmar' was a post-colonial decision—but one made by an illegitimate military regime seeking to assert ethno-nationalistic objectives. We have chosen to use Myanmar in this introduction as it is the country name that is now settled internally and most widely used internationally. Nevertheless, this choice also has implications for ways of thinking about centre and borders, as Burma continues to be the name preferred by several ethnic armed organizations, most residents of ethnic border states, and the majority of refugees and activist groups outside the country.

Critical thinking about borders starts with noticing their effects and consequences. In 2002, Van Schendel called for new ways of thinking about place to avoid the trap of 'geographies of ignorance': by examining events through familiar parameters, we fail to see what lies beyond those parameters and remain stuck in conventional ways of seeing.[8] A rich body of work in border studies has pursued his call for new 'geographies of knowing', with South and Southeast Asia as productive sites of study.[9] The burgeoning of borders research has been

[7] Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism and Political Paranoia in Burma. An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (London: Curzon, 1999); Mikael Gravers, 'Being Excluded: Muslim and Hindu Communities in Karen State', in *Everyday Justice in Myanmar*, (ed.) H. M. Kyed (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020), pp. 219–255.

[8] Willem Van Schendel, 'Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 20, no. 6, 2002, pp. 647–668.

[9] Su-Ann Oh (ed.), *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary-Making and Figured Worlds* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2016); Alexander Horstmann,

accompanied by a plethora of new terms seeking to capture different aspects and processes of border phenomena: borderscapes, borderworlds, borderlands, borderities, boundaries, frontiers, bordering processes.[10] This work has recognized borders as a lens through which to understand the state and challenged simplistic conceptions of centralized authority and control by detailing cross-border relationships, transnational mobilities, and liminalities. Most importantly, borders research has changed our understanding of borders from a static fact to a dynamic set of processes, recognizing that borders are simultaneously territorial and deterritorialized, enacted and performed through bordering processes (as discussed further below). Our understanding of border governance—the central theme of this issue—takes forward several of these insights and recognizes borderlands as constituted through continuous interaction between personal action, political institutions, space, and spatiality. We also respond to some remaining gaps, including by considering the meanings and effects of internal borders, and by focusing specifically on bordering processes at a time of political transition.

Border governance is certainly not the exclusive preserve of the state. A plurality of decision-making processes is manifested in borderlands and carried out by a variety of actors at the local, regional, national, and international levels. In Myanmar, participants in bordering processes include ethnic armed organizations, local-level representatives of the national government and administration, the military, the Border

Martin Saxer and Alessandro Rippa, *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Alexander Horstmann and Reed Wadley (eds), *Centring the Margin: Agency and Narrative in Southeast Asian Borderlands* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009); Paula Banerjee, Anasua Basu and Ray Chaudhury (eds), *Women in Indian Borderlands* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2011); Michael Eilenberg, 'Frontier Constellations: Agrarian Expansion and Sovereignty on the Indonesian-Malaysian Border', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2014, pp. 157–182.

[10] Chiara Brambilla, 'Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept', *Geopolitics*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2015, pp. 14–34; Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, 'Borders, Borderlands and Theory: An Introduction', *Geopolitics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–6; Frédéric Giraut and Anne Laure Amilhat Szary (eds), *Borderities and the Politics of Contemporary Mobile Borders* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015); Mandy Sadan (ed.), *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire 1994–2011* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016); Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (eds), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

Guard Force,[11] militias, civil society organizations, international investors, development agencies, religious leaders, and various village-level leaders. To varying degrees, these actors coexist, compete, and interact in various areas of governance in the borderlands, including the provision of services, order-making, management of natural resources, and the regulation of territories and populations.[12] Significant activities in the borderlands also include large-scale and transnational projects in infrastructure, transport, and energy as well as illicit economies in drugs, trafficking, and smuggling. In this climate of plural and contested power, questions of authority and legitimacy come to the fore. We seek to unravel the complexities of different plural and hybrid modes of governance in an analysis that encompasses the role of the state but which does not place the state at the centre or conceptualize governance as a state/non-state binary. Questions of legitimacy, including the absence of state legitimacy, are central to several of the articles in this special issue, including those by Ho, Kyed, and McConnachie.[13] This is another area that the post-coup period has thrown into sharp relief, as mass membership of the Civil Disobedience Movement and wider society in Myanmar have contributed to new understandings of the depth of

[11] The Border Guard Force (or BGF) was formed in 2009 to integrate members of ethnic armed organizations that made ceasefire agreements with the government in the 1990s. It was an initiative that followed the 2008 Constitution's demand for a single army. While some armed groups agreed to join, others refused, as it would have meant that they lost their autonomous ethnic armed group status, becoming units within the army (the Tatmadaw). See Helene Maria Kyed and Mikael Gravers, 'Non-State Armed Groups in the Myanmar Peace Process. What Are the Future Options?', Danish Institute for International Studies Working Paper, 07/2014.

[12] Brian McCartan and Kim Joliffe, 'Ethnic Armed Actors and Justice Provision in Myanmar', report by The Asia Foundation, October 2016, available at: https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Ethnic-Armed-Actors-and-Justice-Provision-in-Myanmar_EN.pdf, [accessed 14 December 2021]; John Buchanan, 'Militias in Myanmar', report by The Asia Foundation, 2016, available at: https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Militias-in-Myanmar.pdf, [accessed 14 December 2021]; Kyed (ed.), *Everyday Justice in Myanmar*.

[13] Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, 'Border Governance in Kachin State, Myanmar: Un/caring States and Aspirant State Building during Humanitarian Crises', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000499; Helene Maria Kyed, 'Frontier Governance: Contested and Plural Authorities in a Karen Village after the Ceasefire', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000360; Kirsten McConnachie, 'Refugee Policy as Border Governance: Refugee Return, Peacebuilding and Myanmar's Politics of Transition', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000189.

military cruelty and the roots of ethnic resistance. Opposition to military rule is now more inclusive than ever before, with Bamar and ethnic minorities uniting around a common enemy and with the National Unity Government supporting a federal democratic union—a goal of many ethnic border peoples since the onset of independence.

In this special issue we seek to present a grounded, multidisciplinary perspective on borders and bordering processes that broadens understanding of Myanmar's governance landscape. Paasi has argued for the importance of *context* in border studies, of empirical research that is rooted in political and social reality, and which can trace the exercise of power through territorializing and bordering processes.[14] Every contributor to this special issue has conducted field research and had an extended involvement with Myanmar and its borderlands. A concern with lived experiences of border governance runs through the contributions. A number of the articles (Ho, Kyed, Nyana Yoni, and McDuie-Ra)[15] explore how residents of ethnic border states experience and navigate institutional pluralism and the bordering processes of state and non-state authorities. Others (Lidauer, McConnachie, and Thawnghmung and Htoo)[16] illuminate how political changes, peace negotiations, and interventions by the central state and international agencies have affected governance in the borderlands. Some articles concentrate on domestic and internal borders (Nyana Yoni, Thawnghmung and Htoo, Lidauer, and Kyed), while others also consider international relationships (McDuie-Ra, Ho, and McConnachie).

[14] Anssi Paasi, 'Borders, Theory and the Challenge of Relational Thinking', in Corey Johnson, Reece Jones, Anssi Paasi, Louise Amoore, Alison Mountz, Mark Salter and Chris Rumford, 'Interventions on Rethinking "the Border" in Border Studies', *Political Geography*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2011, pp. 61–69, pp. 62–63.

[15] Nyana Yoni, 'Enacting Border Governance through Multi-Scalar Violence: Exclusion and Discrimination of Rohingya People in Rakhine State', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000135; Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Mobilizing Bodies and Body Parts, from Myanmar to Manipur: Medical Connections through Borderlands in "Transition"', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2000027X.

[16] Michael Lidauer, 'Boundary Making in Myanmar's Electoral Process: Where Elections Do Not Take Place', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000335; Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung and Saw Eh Htoo, 'The Fractured Centre: "Two-Headed Government" and Threats to the Peace Process in Myanmar', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000372.

We developed this special issue in the hope that our findings could inform policies and encourage national and international policymakers to be more responsive to lived experiences in Myanmar. The policy context inside Myanmar has now changed beyond our worst fears but our central arguments remain relevant: for real peace, the borderlands must be at the centre. Many policy priorities for the Myanmar state and for international actors have particular salience in border territories, such as border security, drug policy, transport and energy infrastructure, migration, development, and humanitarianism. A 'borderland lens' is particularly relevant in understanding opportunities for and impediments to peacebuilding and transition. As Meehan and Goodhand's work on 'spatialized political settlements' has demonstrated, there is a strong and under-researched connection between borderlands and peacebuilding.[17] This is certainly true in Myanmar, where the relationship between the central state, ethnic border states, and border peoples lies at the heart of political violence, political transition, and the nature and production of the Myanmar state.

The articles in this collection illustrate the above arguments by examining the meaning and significance of border governance, with a focus on Myanmar, its ethnic border states within, and their relations to other nations bordering the country. Our approach to border governance engages with and develops scholarly debates in three primary areas: (i) Borders, territoriality, and bordering processes; (ii) Plural governance and everyday bordering; and (iii) Peacebuilding and the borders of transition. These themes are considered in turn below.

Borders, territoriality, and bordering processes

The governance of borderlands in Myanmar is a key driver of political change, with deep implications for the future peace and stability of the nation as a whole.[18] Yet, as Rumford observes, borders are multiperspectival: they 'mean different things to different people, and

[17] Jonathan Goodhand and Patrick Meehan, 'Spatialising Political Settlements', in *Accord Insight 4: Borderlands and Peacebuilding: A View from the Margins*, (eds) Sharri Plonski and Zahbia Yousuf (London: Conciliation Resources, 2018), pp. 14–19, available at: https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Borderlands_and_peacebuilding_a_view_from_the_margins_Accord_Insight_4.pdf, [accessed 14 December 2021].

[18] Lee Jones, 'Explaining Myanmar's Transition: The Periphery is Central', *Democratization*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2014, pp. 780–802.

work differently on different groups'.[19] The questions researchers should consider are thus not simply about governance at the border, or governance of the border, but also the place of borders in the political imaginary, as manifested in political-legal institutions and constituted through social and cultural relations. As mentioned above, border studies have evolved from analysing borders as lines of demarcation and separation to analysing *bordering processes* enacted by a plurality of state and non-state actors.[20] The demarcating function of borders is significant, of course. The position of a borderline affects political relationships, but it can also shape individual identities, relationships, livelihoods, mobilities, and even dictate life expectancy and health indicators. There is no doubt that the line on a map matters—but it is the processes that establish, reinforce, or challenge that line that give rise to its meaning and consequences.[21] Bordering processes are also a revealing insight into the exercise of political power. On this reading, borders become 'alternative geographies of power and difference', illustrative 'not only [of] the limits of sovereign power, but also often the site of the nation-state's most acute expression'.[22]

The shift from borders to bordering processes is exemplified by contemporary border policing, which is increasingly diffused through a range of legal and political institutions, including employers, healthcare professionals, and universities as well as border officials and police. The difference between border checkpoints and ongoing immigration surveillance is captured by Balibar's conclusion that, in the modern state, 'some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all'.[23] In other words, 'the border is everywhere'.[24] However, bordering processes

[19] Chris Rumford, 'Towards a Multiperspectival Study of Borders', *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, pp. 887–902, p. 894.

[20] Ibid., pp. 887–902; N. Parker and N. Vaughan-Williams, 'Critical Border Studies: Broadening and Deepening the "Lines in the Sand" Agenda', *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, pp. 727–733; Paasi, 'Border Studies Reanimated', pp. 2303–2309; Johnson et al., 'Interventions on Rethinking', pp. 62–63; Nira Yuval-Davis, Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy, *Bordering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

[21] David Newman, 'On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2003, pp. 13–24.

[22] Townsend Middleton, 'States of Difference: Refiguring Ethnicity and its "Crisis" at India's Borders', *Political Geography*, vol. 35, July 2013, pp. 14–24, p. 14.

[23] Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 84.

[24] Ibid.; David Lyon, 'The Border is Everywhere: ID Cards, Surveillance and the Other', in *Global Surveillance and Policing: Borders, Security, Identity*, (eds) Elia Zureik and Mark B. Salters (Cullompton: Willan, 2005), pp. 66–82.

are not solely, or even primarily, about the control of immigration but about the political and social processes that establish ideas of identity, belonging, and entitlement. As Yuval-Davis et al. recognize, 'Bordering is continuously happening' and is carried out by a range of state and non-state actors to 'differentiate between "us" and "them", those who are in and those who are out, those who are allowed to cross the borders and those who are not'.[25] At heart, bordering processes are a reflection of relationships of belonging and difference, inclusion and exclusion.[26]

Borders as territories and as expressions of territoriality must also be understood as experienced in everyday life and perpetually being negotiated by those who live in border territories.[27] Competing territorial control (that is, territorialization) is enacted both by central state and non-state actors through military and non-military action (such as using ideological symbols, historical narratives, or humanitarian aid to win support for one's rule).[28] These actions operationalize or reify aspirations to rule and are deeply felt by the individuals who inhabit border territories, whether it is through the ethnic, religious, or national identities that border dwellers embody and perform (or that are imposed upon them) or the bureaucratic procedures and controls that must be navigated in daily life. This is particularly evident in Nyana Yoni's article in this special issue, which explores how Rohingya people in Rakhine state are subjected to exclusionary bureaucratic procedures in everyday life, such as denial of access to ID (identity) cards, travel restrictions, regulation of marriages, and lack of access to healthcare, schooling, and justice. Such bordering processes are reflective of and reinforce long-standing prejudices projecting the Rohingya as a threat to Myanmar's borders and a 'terror at the Western Gate'. Mobilization of Burman majority values against Rohingya in Myanmar is rooted partly in anxieties regarding external borders (as reflected in the

[25] Yuval-Davis et al., *Bordering*, p. 7.

[26] See, for example, Kirsten McConnachie, 'Boundaries and Belonging in the Indo-Myanmar Borderlands: Chin Refugees in Mizoram', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2018, pp. 314–333; Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Adjacent Identities in Northeast India', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2015, pp. 400–413.

[27] Anssi Paasi, 'Boundaries as Social Processes: Territoriality in the World of Flows', *Geopolitics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1998, pp. 69–88.

[28] See, for example, Karin Dean, 'Spaces, Territorialities and Ethnography on the Thai-, Sino-and Indo-Myanmar Boundaries', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Border Studies*, (ed.) Doris Wastl-Walter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 219–241.

portrayal of Rohingya as 'invaders' from Bangladesh) but it is also a reflection of internal hierarchies of difference that have played a defining role in Myanmar for decades.

Bordering processes thus encompass 'various constructions of individual and collective relationships between "self" and "non-self"'.[29] For example, Smith explains that women often 'materially experience borders and their margins through state violence, expulsion, and more subtle and mundane forms of policing that act on individual […] bodies, structure family life, or infect discourses'.[30] Through processes of inclusion and exclusion, the performativity of the border inevitably intersects with the assertion and construction of identity and power, which have become 'a central problematic' in borders research.[31] As early as 2005, Desforges et al. recognized the existence of a 'new geographies of citizenship' as a defined research agenda concerned with the scales and spaces through which processes of inclusion, exclusion, citizenship, and belonging are enacted. This is an important line of enquiry in Myanmar, where identity and the racialization of identity—especially ethnic and religious identity—lie at the heart of bordering processes and everyday bordering, manifested in areas like access to education, jobs, the ability to use ethnic languages, the freedom of religion, and notions of religious authority.[32]

Borders can function both as a barrier and as an enabling factor.[33] For example, borderland residents experience constraints related to the physical geography of the border terrain (for movement of goods and people) and/or geopolitics that split the border space into different jurisdictions controlled by competing political and military

[29] Nira Yuval-Davis, 'A Situated Intersectional Everyday Approach to the Study of Bordering', EU Border Scapes Working Paper 2, August 2013, p. 1.

[30] Sara Smith, 'Gendered and Embodied Geopolitics of Borders, Marginalization, and Contingent Solidarity', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2017, pp. 350–353, p. 350.

[31] Middleton, 'States of Difference', p. 14.

[32] International Crisis Group, 'Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar', 28 August 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/312-identity-crisis-ethnicity-and-conflict-myanmar, [accessed 14 December 2021]. On ethnic language and education, see Marie Lall and Ashley South, 'Power Dynamics of Language and Education Policy in Myanmar's Contested Transition', *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2018, pp. 482–502.

[33] Junxi Qian and Xueqiong Tang, 'Dilemma of Modernity: Interrogating Cross-Border Ethnic Identities at China's Southwest Frontier', *Area 49*, 2017, pp. 52–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12283.

bodies.[34] Yet, those same borders can act as a resource, for example, by allowing persons fleeing suffering or punishment inflicted by the central state to seek refuge across the border, to galvanize ethnic kin networks across the border for help, or for border dwellers to gain mileage for political or economic purposes.[35] Recognizing the duality of borders as a simultaneous source of threat and an asset to be exploited also highlights the role of human action in border creation, maintenance, and subversion. As Rumford recognizes, '[b]orders can be created, shifted, and deconstructed by a range of actors […] borderwork is no longer the exclusive preserve of the nation-state [….] Citizens, as well as states, have the ability to shape debordering and rebordering.'[36] 'Citizen borderwork' can take many forms, potentially reinforcing and reproducing state-approved borders and boundaries (see Nyana Yoni's article in this special issue) as well as proposing competing forms of bordering (see the articles by Kyed, Ho, and Thawnghmung and Htoo in this special issue).

Neither 'citizen borderwork' or 'state borderwork' are uniform across Myanmar's borders. Van Schendel notes that 'borders vary locally in terms of regulatory regimes, symbolic significance, permeability, social advantage and change over time' and it therefore 'makes little sense to think of a border as an unambiguous entity encasing a country's territory. It is always compound, if only because each country may maintain several regional border regimes concurrently.'[37] This varied, 'compound' border governance is evident in Myanmar, which has international border regimes with five countries: China, India,

[34] Jason Cons, 'Narrating Boundaries: Framing and Contesting Suffering, Community, and Belonging in Enclaves along the India–Bangladesh Border', *Political Geography*, vol. 35, July 2013, pp. 37–46; Michelle Ann Miller, Carl Middleton, Jonathan Rigg and David Taylor, 'Hybrid Governance of Transboundary Commons: Insights from Southeast Asia', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2020, pp. 297–313; Antia Mato Bouzas, 'Mixed Legacies in Contested Borderlands: Skardu and the Kashmir Dispute', *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, pp. 867–886, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2012.660577.

[35] Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'The India–Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and Political Possibilities', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2014, pp. 81–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2014.892694; Shaun Lin and Carl Grundy-Warr, 'One Bridge, Two Towns and Three Countries: Anticipatory Geopolitics in the Greater Mekong Subregion', *Geopolitics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2012, pp. 952–979, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2012.662556.

[36] Chris Rumford, 'Theorizing Borders', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2006, pp. 155–169, pp. 164–165.

[37] Willem van Schendel, 'Afterword: Making the Most of "Sensitive" Borders', in *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, (ed.) David Gellner (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 266–267.

Bangladesh, Thailand, and Laos. These countries have very different demographics and levels of economic and political power, reflected in border regimes of varying rigidity. The India-Myanmar border is governed by a free movement regime that allows border residents to travel within 16 km in either direction (see McDuie-Ra's article in this special issue). In contrast, the Myanmar-Bangladesh border is becoming increasingly securitized and controlled, following the template of India's border regime with Bangladesh (which is dominated by the construction of the world's longest border fence) (see Nyana Yoni's article in this special issue).[38] Thailand historically took a somewhat fluid approach to border management, which reflects the affiliations and kinships of cross-border 'hill tribes' of shared ethnicity but has also benefited Thailand in terms of the presence of a large undocumented migrant labour force. Similarly, co-ethnic populations across the China-Myanmar border attest to shared histories and cultures among the people.[39] The Chinese government has long tacitly accepted the presence of ethnic armed groups at the borderline. However, the China-Myanmar border became more heavily securitized after the outbreak of renewed conflict between the Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar military in 2011, resulting in human displacement that threatened to spill over into Chinese soil (see Ho's article in this special issue). Since the coup, while China has continued to refuse to extend refuge to internally displaced persons from Myanmar, it has supplied COVID-19 vaccines and medical aid to the Kachin Independence Army and other ethnic armed groups with whom it shares a border, presumably to prevent cross-border infection transmissions. The coup has given rise to new waves of displacement, which again have demonstrated different border regimes and relationships. In particular, the northeast Indian states of Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland have extended generous hospitality to people fleeing across the border in Myanmar, even when doing so has clashed with directions from the central Indian Government to send new arrivals back.

Of course, borders also have more local and localized effects. Bouzas argues that a borderland perspective examines 'not only the impact of interstate warfare and the humanitarian dimension at the border as an

[38] McDuie-Ra, 'The India–Bangladesh Border Fence', pp. 81–94; Oh (ed.), *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes*, pp. 4–5.

[39] Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, 'Mobilising Affinity Ties: Kachin Internal Displacement and the Geographies of Humanitarianism at the China-Myanmar Border', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2017, pp. 84–97.

edge of the state [but also] to enquire how and in which ways local populations have been kept on one side of the line or the other and their experiences of it'.[40] For Bouzas, the role of the state is given primacy as 'a powerful agent of territorialization'.[41] We adopt a different view, arguing that various actors within the borderlands are simultaneously engaging in their own bordering processes related to claiming territory and asserting territoriality, often in tension or competition with the central state. In Myanmar, this is evident in the ethnic border states, where for decades ethnic armed and civilian organizations have constituted parallel state-making actors, who, like the central state, are engaging in the governance of the borderlands and in bordering processes—jurisdictionally, territorially, and in terms of defining boundaries between groups (see, for instance, Kyed's article in this special issue). At the same time, these actors operate within borderlands and across borderlines at the transnational or global levels (for example, through religious and non-governmental organizations).[42] Just as the central state engages with processes of globalization, so too do borderland residents.[43] The multi-scalarity of borders and the multiplicity of stakeholders, diverse logics, and discordant processes that operate in the borderlands must therefore be taken into account for a fuller appreciation of border governance and its effects.[44]

Plural governance and everyday bordering

According to Yuval-Davis et al., borderlands have two defining features: first, they are 'spaces in which the lives of the local population are formed as well as controlled by the dual and competing political, cultural and economic bordering realities on the ground'; and, second,

[40] Bouzas, 'Mixed Legacies', p. 871.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Vanessa Lamb, '"Where is the Border?" Villagers, Environmental Consultants and the "Work" of the Thai–Burma Border', *Political Geography*, vol. 40, May 2014, pp. 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2014.02.001; Alexander Horstmann, 'Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2011, pp. 513–532, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fer031.

[43] Jussi Laine, 'The Multiscalar Production of Borders', *Geopolitics*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2016, pp. 465–482.

[44] Margath Walker and Alisa Winton, 'Towards a Theory of the Discordant Border', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2017, pp. 245–257, https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12192.

'borderlands are specific territorial zones in which the geographic state borders themselves become embedded in the everyday lives, identities, and livelihood of the people who live in them, so that the border largely defines the spatial understanding of the local context and the social and cultural meanings attached to them'.[45] This definition captures two themes that are also important for our work: recognition of borderlands as sites of pluralistic authority and as sites constituted by everyday lived experience. Borderlands lie at the jurisdiction and authority of different actors, across national borders, and between those territories and the national heartland or centre. These spaces are not separate but connected and related, as well as continually renegotiated through plural governance.[46] Efforts by border studies scholars to detail the ways in which state sovereignty is evaded, contested, or reproduced by non-state actors have been a necessary corrective to methodological nationalism.[47] This work tells us of contesting and competing sovereignties, and of the rule of local actors and their role in shaping identities and activities that may challenge, contest, or conform with the state bordering activities described above.

Attempts to conceptualize the plural and negotiated nature of authority and power in borderlands in general and in Myanmar's ethnic border states in particular have utilized theories of multiscalar governance,[48] assemblages,[49] legal pluralism,[50] and hybrid governance.[51] These varied

[45] Yuval-Davis et al., *Bordering*, p. 21.

[46] Laine, 'The Multiscalar Production', pp. 465–482.

[47] Chris Rumford, 'Towards a Vernacularized Border Studies: The Case of Citizen Borderwork', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2013, pp. 169–180.

[48] Ian Baird and Li Cansong, 'Variegated Borderlands Governance in Dehong Dai-Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture along the China-Myanmar Border', *Geoforum*, vol. 85, October 2017, pp. 214–224.

[49] Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Rachel Sharples, 'Transversal Borderings: Territory and Mobility for Human Rights Activists in the Thai-Burma Borderlands', *Borderlands*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 37–63.

[50] On legal pluralism in Myanmar, see Kyed (ed.), *Everyday Justice in Myanmar*; Helene Maria Kyed, 'Introduction to the Special Issue on Everyday Justice', *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2018, pp. ii–xxii.

[51] Kristof Titeca and Rachel Flynn, '"Hybrid Governance," Legitimacy, and (Il)legality in the Informal Cross-Border Trade in Panyimur, Northwest Uganda', *African Studies Review*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2014, pp. 71–91, https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2014.6; Ashley South, '"Hybrid Governance" and the Politics of Legitimacy in the Myanmar Peace Process', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 48 no. 1, 2018, pp. 50–66; Miller et al., 'Hybrid Governance of Transboundary Commons', pp. 297–313.

approaches share a recognition of borderlands as plural and relational spaces, in which both territorial-administrative and symbolic borders are not fully fixed but subject to various forms of 'rebordering' and 'debordering' practices performed by a multiplicity of actors.[52] The presence of multiple state, non-state, and international entities in borderlands and the interactions between them speak to this political relationship between the borderlands and the central state. In a set of contributions on 'rethinking the border', Johnson et al. recognize the utility of an expansive definition of borders as both territorialized and deterritorialized, spatial and symbolic, processual and relational.[53] In a similar vein, Rumford calls for 'seeing like a border', a perspective shift that necessitates seeing beyond the state:

> Border studies now routinely addresses a wide range of complex 'what, where and who' questions […] It is still possible to ask these questions and receive a straightforward and predictable answer: 'the state'. This is no longer a satisfactory answer. Seeing like a border involves the recognition that borders are woven into the fabric of society and are the routine business of all concerned. In this sense, borders are the key to understanding networked connectivity as well as questions of identity, belonging, political conflict, and societal transformation.[54]

Myanmar's ethnic border states have experienced the worst impositions of state oppression, yet are also the spaces where state power is most fractured and contested. Each of the seven ethnic border states has a distinctive governance climate where the policies, laws, and services that affect daily life are performed and shaped by a range of state and non-state actors. Depending on the particular context, these actors range from ethnic armed groups, military officers of the Myanmar army, militias, government department officials, police officers, and village leaders to faith-based leaders, civil society organizations, and international agencies. To varying degrees and with mixed effects, each of these actors plays a part in governing the borderlands and in negotiating not only the spatial territorial-administrative borders and who should control and define these, but also the symbolic borders of inclusion and exclusion related to rights, benefits, mobility, belonging, and affiliation.

[52] Rumford, 'Towards a Multiperspectival Study', pp. 887–902; Rumford, 'Theorizing Borders', pp. 155–169.

[53] C. Rumford 'Seeing like a Border', in Johnson et al., 'Interventions on Rethinking', p. 68.

[54] Ibid., p. 68.

Ethnic and religious identity, and associated forms of symbolic othering and boundary-making between groups, have been particularly prevalent in shaping border governance, linking symbolic and spatial dimensions of bordering. This is seen in justice provision and the control of crime (see Kyed's article in this special issue) as well as the distribution of aid (see Ho's article in this special issue). The effects of institutional pluralism on border governance are not uniform. In some areas, ethnic armed organizations have a very strong presence and can compete at par with the state for political authority and administrative control. This leads at times to high levels of competition over various forms of bordering processes, such as jurisdictional boundaries, educational systems, and administrative authority (see, for instance, Kyed's article in this special issue).[55]

Despite these contextual differences, a core theme that runs through the contributions in this special issue is the extent to which the institutional pluralism of border governance is shaped by deep-seated and historically embedded mistrust in the central Myanmar state. This mistrust (and the associated illegitimacy of the central state and its military) has given rise to and contributed to the continued salience of alternative sources of authority, power, patronage, and protection. The concepts of plural or hybrid governance explicitly acknowledge that the state and its modes of operating only constitute one among a range of governance actors, practices, and norms. Hybridity also denotes that the boundary between state and non-state institutions is seldom fixed, but more commonly blurred in practice.[56] Within studies of governance and the constitution of authority, hybridization is exemplified by the duplication of practices, discourses, and norms. This can be seen throughout the Myanmar borderlands, when, for example, ethnic armed groups who would otherwise oppose the state employ similar bureaucratic practices and nation-building discourses as the state.[57]

[55] McCartan and Jolliffe, 'Ethnic Armed Actors'; South, 'Hybrid Governance', pp. 50–66.

[56] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, '"Hybridity, So What?" The Anti-Hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 18, no. 2–3, 2001, pp. 219–245; Peter Albrecht and L. Wiuff Moe, 'The Simultaneity of Authority in Hybrid Orders', *Peacebuilding*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–16; Helene M. Kyed, 'Hybridity and Boundary-Making: Exploring the Politics of Hybridisation', *Third World Thematics*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2017, pp. 464–480.

[57] Annika Pohl Harrisson, 'Fish Caught in Clear Water: Encompassed State-Making in Southeast Myanmar', *Territory, Politics and Governance*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2018, pp. 533–552; on this issue see also Helene Maria Kyed and Annika Pohl Harrisson, 'Ceasefire State-Making

Our recognition of plural border governance does not erase the state as a significant actor. National policies for border regions reflect the position of these areas in the national political imaginary, which in Myanmar is defined by a perceived inferiority of the border by the 'centre'. This perception reflects a long historical legacy of the political and cultural construction of borderlands as underdeveloped 'frontiers', which are seen 'from the centre' as on the edges of state control and as 'spaces of desire' for state and military expansion, capture, and development. Central state expansion into imagined frontiers is often contested by alternative authorities that also aspire to consolidate a form of statehood, as is evident in Kyed's contribution to this special issue, which deals with an area of Karen state where the ethnic armed group, the Karen National Union, operates as a kind of parallel state formation. Through a dual and competitive form of 'frontier border governance', the Karen National Union as well as the central Myanmar state are trying, to different degrees, to govern—administratively, symbolically, and territorially—the Karen 'frontier' areas. This is seen for instance within the fields of judicial interventions, control of crime and education, and moral ordering. An implication of these competing bordering processes is a pluralism of authorities and overlapping forms of governance that are never complete but remain unstable and contested. For example, in the field of justice, the coup has deepened mistrust in and fear of using official state courts but is also likely to make it more precarious to use local informal justice institutions, as authorities not aligned with the military junta are targeted by the security forces.

The instability of border politics in Myanmar is a characteristic that Van Schendel identifies as existing in various locations in South Asia where border politics are volatile and characterized by 'uncertain sovereignty and apprehensive territoriality'. He attributes this situation to 'a long history of uncertain border making […] decisions that were taken decades or centuries ago continue to shape life in today's borderlands, and well beyond'. All too often, in Asia and elsewhere, contentious circumstances of border creation established legacies of resentment that fed cultures of violence. The consequences of border formation and disputation 'reverberate throughout state territories […]

and Justice Provision in Ethnic Armed Group Areas of Southeast Myanmar', *Sojourn*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2019, pp. 290–326.

into a host of social processes that at first appear to have little to do with borders'.[58]

The presence of border histories in contemporary bordering practices is evident throughout Myanmar in the ways that identity politics have been employed by both state and ethnic actors as a mode of governing the borderlands and managing centre-border relationship through continuous, competitive, and oppositional bordering processes. The state's construction of the borderlands has played out in various strategies and policies, civilian and militarized. A common thread has been the subordination and dehumanization of borderland residents. Labels and hierarchies of ethnicity (at times mixed with religious identity) have been deployed as bordering processes that define belonging and mark identities and bodies as in-place or out-of-place. National and sub-national discourses on identity have also shaped decades of violence and persecution inflicted on borderland residents who have variously been portrayed as uncivilized, dangerous terrorists, or, in the case of the Rohingya, as invaders (see Nyana Yoni's article in this special issue). A disregard for the lives of those in borderland states was maintained during the years of reform, apparent in state violence in Kachin and Shan states, as well as against the Rohingya. It continues to exist in the post-coup context, as borderland territories such as Chin state experience newly intensified military attacks and destruction. Simultaneously, the coup has enabled new opportunities for hierarchies of ethnicity and identity to be challenged through raising awareness among the majority Bamar population of the state violence perpetrated against Myanmar's ethnic nationalities.

In parallel, informing these state and military actions in borderlands has been the pervasive policies of Burmanization and national identity-making processes that privilege the 'central' identity of Bamar, Buddhist, and Burmese-speaking above the other religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities found mostly in the borderlands.[59] Education has been one tool of Burmanization, with public schooling in the borderlands perceived by border dwellers as a form of attempted forced assimilation of ethnic minority children into the dominant Burmese culture (see Kyed's article in this special issue).[60] Identity politics has a

[58] Van Schendel, 'Afterword', pp. 268–269.

[59] Matthew Walton, 'The "Wages of Burman-ness": Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–27.

[60] Lall and South, 'Power Dynamics', pp. 482–502.

profound effect on everyday forms of governmental exclusion of and discrimination against certain categories of people, as Nyana Yoni (in this special issue) shows in her discussion of state-imposed 'local orders' in Rakhine state.

Ethnic organizations and ordinary residents in the borderlands have responded with their own narratives of belonging, identity, and citizenship claims-making. This includes the creation of ethnic armed organizations and armed resistance to state power, but it also extends to everyday forms of bordering that shape social relationships and cultural identities. It is evident in these bordering processes that government policies feed into and shape popular opinions and counter actions. Our approach to border governance seeks to capture this plural complexity and to explore the interrelationship between micro- and macro-level forms of bordering. We do not give primacy to a single set of actors but seek to investigate governance from the perspective of the borderlands and lived everyday experiences. In doing this, we follow an 'everyday governance' approach that aspires to understand governance in practice, and which values the experiences of ordinary residents and locally situated governance actors without losing sight of the influence of national level policies and institutions. A focus on the 'everyday' has been groundbreaking in socio-legal studies[61] and is increasingly apparent in border studies through the work of Yuval-Davis and others on everyday bordering.[62] The concept of the 'everyday' conveys a particular mode of thinking about social life and politics that moves beyond macro structures, elite politics, and abstract processes by acknowledging the agency of ordinary people and the interaction of a multiplicity of practices, relations, and meanings.[63] Several of our contributors apply this approach to analyse distinctive institutional dynamics and governance problems in the ethnic border states, by

[61] Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, *The Common Place of Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Mariana Valverde, *Everyday Law on the Street* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[62] Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas, 'Revisiting Bordering Practices: Irregular Migration, Borders, and Citizenship in Malaysia', *International Political Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015, pp. 128–142; Sarah Turner, 'Making a Living the Hmong Way: An Actor-Oriented Livelihoods Approach to Everyday Politics and Resistance in Upland Vietnam', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 102, no. 2, 2012, pp. 403–422; R. Jones and C. Johnson (eds), *Placing the Border in Everyday Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Yuval-Davis et al., *Bordering*.

[63] Xavier Guillaume and Jef Huysmans, 'The Concept of "the Everyday": Ephemeral Politics and the Abundance of Life', *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2018, pp. 278–296.

focusing on humanitarian aid (see Ho's article in this special issue), ethnic armed group patrimonialism, and the provision of justice and regulation of crime (see Kyed's article in this special issue). McDuie-Ra (in this special issue) shows how unequal levels of economic and social development between India and Myanmar have fostered new forms of cross-border relationships and an everyday mobility of 'bodies and body parts', as people from Myanmar travel to Manipur for medical diagnostics and care.

It is clear that political reforms during the 'triple transition' created new dynamics of authority and governance. The inclusion of these diverse actors and interests in policymaking was less obvious. Whose voices are heard, when, and how is of particular concern in relation to 'ethnic' civil society organizations and community-based organizations, which are key service providers in the ethnic border states (and have been for many years). Ho (in this special issue) addresses this issue in her article on the barriers and access to humanitarian aid delivery in Kachin state at the China-Myanmar border. She demonstrates how a range of actors —including the separatist Kachin Independent Organisation (KIO) government, civil society Kachin organizations (faith-based and secular), and the Kachin diaspora—intervened to meet the needs of internally displaced persons. These groups exhibit expressions of care to mitigate the grievances felt by the Kachin people, but in so doing they inadvertently (or not) fuel demands for justice and even separatism, thus influencing governance outcomes at the border. Since the coup in 2021, the role of these groups has become even more important to border communities which face displacement due to military action and a tacit neglect of their health needs, despite the spread of COVID-19 infections.

Another important set of participants in the plural institutional landscape of borderlands are international actors, including commercial actors as well as governments, donors, and international non-governmental organizations. During the 1990s and 2000s, Myanmar was effectively closed to the international community by virtue of the military junta's policies, international sanctions, and an informal tourism boycott. As a result, despite being designated one of the world's 'least developed nations', Myanmar received very little international intervention or aid. The increased presence of international actors in Myanmar was one of the most dramatic changes of the past decade, bringing an influx of international money and personnel that added new complexity to governance pathways and institutions. International actors play a prominent role in 'border governance', both by stipulating conditions for aid delivery and by

impacting on local practices through flows of expertise and resources. The effect of these activities was particularly pronounced in interventions around peacebuilding and transition.

Peacebuilding and the borders of transition

The discussion above has described everyday governance in Myanmar's borderlands, where a plurality of actors—state and non-state, local and extra-local—coexist, negotiate, and compete in shaping what is still an unknown political trajectory related to peace and the distribution of authority to govern people and territories.[64] Focusing on Kachin state and northern Shan state, Meehan has argued that the peace process 'stands at the apex of three competing pressures':

> (1) the interests of Myanmar's ruling elites who view the peace process as a mechanism through which to make ethnic groups compliant, rather than a reason to enter into genuine political dialogue with them; (2) powerful scepticism among ethnic armed groups and borderland populations towards the rhetoric of ceasefires, political dialogue and inclusive development that surrounds the peace process; and (3) diverse—and at times conflicting—cross-border political, security and business interests.[65]

Past and present bordering processes in Myanmar feed into the ongoing politics of peacebuilding and political transition. Even prior to the coup we employed the language of 'transition' cautiously, recognizing that there was considerable debate as to the nature and purpose of reforms in Myanmar.[66] Others were less hesitant. The World Bank first labelled Myanmar as undergoing a 'triple transition' in 2012, at the start of peace negotiations between the military and ethnic armed organizations. The next few years brought rapid change, including a series of bilateral ceasefires between the new (quasi-civilian) government and ethnic armed organizations. In 2015, the Nationwide Ceasefire

[64] Harrisson and Kyed, 'Ceasefire State-Making', pp. 290–326.

[65] P. Meehan, 'Peacebuilding amidst War in Northern Myanmar', in *Borderlands and Peacebuilding*, (eds) Plonski and Yousuf, p. 38.

[66] Kristian Stokke and Soe Myint Aung, 'Transition to Democracy or Hybrid Regime? The Dynamics and Outcomes of Democratization in Myanmar', *European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 32, 2020, pp. 274–293; Stefano Ruzza, Giuseppe Gabusi and Davide Pellegrino, 'Authoritarian Resilience through Top-Down Transformation: Making Sense of Myanmar's Incomplete Transition', *Italian Political Science Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2019, pp. 193–209.

Agreement (NCA) was secured with nine ethnic armed organizations. A month later, the National League for Democracy won a landslide electoral victory and formed the first civilian government in Myanmar since the late 1950s. The incoming government claimed that the peace process was a priority and continued negotiations with ethnic armed organizations at the Twenty First Century Panglong Peace Conference (convened in 2016, 2017, and 2018). In 2018, two more ethnic armed organizations signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. After this, the peace process stalled and by February 2021, few people had faith that this process could produce a lasting settlement between the Government of Myanmar, the military, and the country's many ethnic armed organizations. Nevertheless, the return to all-out war in Myanmar in 2021 is a dramatic descent from the excitement and optimism of the early 2010s, a time described by Thant Myint-U as a ringside seat to the international peacebuilding industry: 'Tony Blair dropped by one day. Bill Clinton came to give a speech. Western governments, the European Union, and Japan queued up to provide funding, eager to be part of one of the most successful peace processes in recent times.'[67] In other words, international aid and support for peacebuilding was generous, and rapidly escalated from its position in the early 2000s when it had a minor role focused on contested provision of cross-border humanitarian aid to large-scale investment through bilateral partnership with the government.[68]

The changed dynamics of aid delivery during the reform period marked a shift towards more direct support through the central state apparatus and, as such, represented a vote of confidence in the country's governance. Unfortunately for all concerned 'Burma was not, however, on the verge of peace.'[69] Long before the coup, there were indications that the government and military had little interest in resolving conflict in the ethnic border states. Successful and lasting peace in Myanmar would require rethinking boundaries, categories, and hierarchies and replacing narratives of exclusion with processes to promote inclusion and equality. Instead, the supposed transition was characterized by continued state efforts to control borderlands and their residents by (for

[67] Thant Myint-U, *A Hidden History*, p. 122.

[68] Anne Décobert, *The Politics of Aid to Burma: A Humanitarian Struggle on the Thai-Burmese Border* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); A. Décobert '"The Struggle Isn't Over": Shifting Aid Paradigms and Redefining "Development" in Eastern Myanmar', *World Development*, vol. 127, March 2020, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104768.

[69] Thant Myint-U, *A Hidden History*, p. 122.

example) military targeting of civilians in ethnic border states, continued militarization of ethnic border states, and the attempted erasure of Rohingya identity.

The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was treated as a major milestone, but many ethnic armed organizations remained outside its arrangements, including some of the largest armies such as the Kachin Independence Army and the United Wa State Army. In Kachin and Shan states, fighting continued and the Myanmar army maintained its strategy of targeting and attacking civilian populations, even using aerial bombardment. Internal displacement camps were created to house those fleeing conflict. Some of those camps were located in government-controlled territories and others in territories controlled by the Kachin Independence Army. The Myanmar government restricted aid access to the latter, leaving internally displaced persons in these camps without any international assistance and dependent on the services provided by local and Kachin-led organizations (see Ho's article in this special issue).

The most notorious political persecution during Myanmar's 'transition' was carried out against the Rohingya. From 2012 onwards there were multiple outbreaks of violence against the Rohingya and other Muslim communities. This culminated in three months of sustained military attacks in Rakhine state in 2017, catalysed by attacks on police and border guard posts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. During the time of the military's counter-attacks, thousands of villages were destroyed, an unknown number of people were killed and more than 700,000 fled across the border to seek safety in Bangladesh. The attacks and atrocities committed by the Myanmar military in Rakhine state have been recognized as likely to constitute international crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity by the International Court of Justice, a United Nations Fact-Finding Mission, and many international commentators.[70] Journalists who reported the existence of Rohingya mass graves were jailed, as were peace activists in Kachin state and other protesters.[71] Currently, and especially since 2019, Rakhine state

[70] United Nations, 'Report of the Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar', A/HRC/39/CRP.2, 17 September 2018, para 1441; Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v Myanmar), Order of 23 January 2019, paras 54–56.

[71] Radio Free Asia, 'Kachins protest jailing of peace activists convicted of defaming Myanmar military', published online on 11 December 2018, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c2cc3b712b.html, [accessed 15 December 2021].

and parts of Chin state have been affected by another set of armed attacks and counter-attacks between the military and the Arakan Army, which claims to represent the interest of the Buddhist Rakhine (not the Rohingya).

The military justified its seizure of political power in February 2021 by disputing the process and results of the November 2020 election. A few weeks before the general elections of November 2020, swathes of the ethnic border states were disenfranchised through electoral cancellations, officially due to security concerns and the lack of functioning state administrations. Electoral cancellations were also used in the 2015 elections and can be seen as one of several boundary-making processes for political exclusion of categories of border residents. Those denied the right to vote are overwhelmingly located in borderlands and identified as of non-Burman ethnicity. Lidauer (in this special issue) discusses in particular the effect of election cancellations on IDPs and minorities living in areas fully or partly controlled by ethnic armed organizations. Many Rohingya were also disenfranchised just before the 2015 elections and, as a result of their exclusion from citizenship status and voting rights, this continued to be the case for the 2020 elections. In these elections around 70 per cent of Rakhine state was also subject to voter cancellations, this time also encompassing Buddhist Rakhine voters in areas where the Arakan National Party is known to have stronger support than the ruling National League for Democracy. The official reason given by the Union Election Commission for these cancellations was armed conflict between the military and the Arakan Army.[72]

The phrase 'political transition' is typically imbued with assumptions of positive transformation. In reality, political transitions are times of change and uncertainty, and therefore of new anxieties that are often reflected in continuing and even intensifying bordering processes. Thawnghmung and Htoo (in this special issue) characterize Myanmar's political regime prior to the coup as a 'two-headed government', with military actors and civilian government locked in an enduring relationship under the terms of the 2008 Constitution, which kept the military in key political positions (including 25 per cent of seats in Parliament at central, state,

[72] See Priscilla Clapp and Jason Tower, 'Election Cancellations in Rakhine State Could Signal Trouble for Myanmar', *United States Institute of Peace*, published online on 5 November 2020, available at: https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/election-cancellations-rakhine-state-could-signal-trouble-myanmar, [accessed 15 December 2021].

and region levels as well as key ministerial posts). This prevented truly independent decision-making by the civilian government, but it also presented a significant obstacle in government efforts to progress the peace process with ethnic armed organizations—and ultimately prevented the government from remaining in control of national politics. The 'two-headed government' is a single-headed junta once again.

Studies of political transition in countries, including Northern Ireland and Nepal, have identified the concept of 'acceptable levels of violence', that is, baseline levels of societal comfort with persistent violence, even during a time of supposed transformation. Decades of state and military violence in Myanmar have normalized violence as a tactic of governance, along with its corollary, acceptable levels of discrimination. Burman ethno-nationalist values of 'one nation, one language, one religion' are no longer official policy but continue to animate political and social institutions to enable the othering of borderlands and border residents. Shortly after the 2015 elections, and contrary to the hopes of many ethnic minority people, the new Government of Myanmar implemented a variety of territorializing and bordering processes that maintained and even increased state control over borderlands, under the auspice of peacebuilding and development. This has included a continuation of legal land reforms that enabled massive land grabs and confiscation in the borderlands; national support for large-scale development projects in borderlands which have serious environmental harms and provide limited local benefit; and the imposition of travel and aid restrictions on several ethnic border states.[73] These processes were consistent with a template of 'liberalization' in which the Government of Myanmar opened up some spaces while continuing to control others.[74]

International actors were in some ways complicit in the state's processes of 'bordering, ordering and othering': from 2011–12, especially after the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, they embraced the transition with high

[73] Jenny Hedström, *Myanmar in Transition: China, Conflict and Ceasefire Economies in Kachin State* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019); Sie Sue Mark, '"Fragmented Sovereignty" over Property Institutions: Developmental Impacts on the Chin Hills Communities', *Journal of Burmese Scholarship*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 131–160; Rainer Einzenberger, 'Contested Frontiers: Indigenous Mobilization and Control over Land and Natural Resources in Myanmar's Upland Areas', *Austrian Journal of Southeast Asia Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2016, pp. 163–172.

[74] Meehan, 'Peacebuilding amidst War', p. 34.

optimism. As a result they substantially increased their engagement with the national government and started to channel aid directly through the central state.[75] This state-centred approach to funding peacebuilding and development activities has been criticized for a failure to fully understand the nature of Myanmar's complex political conflicts.[76] During military rule, the international attention of UN agencies and Western governments (the United States, Canada, and European Union member states) was focused predominantly on the division between military rule and the pro-democracy movement, especially its leading figure, Aung San Suu Kyi. This was a compelling good-versus-evil narrative that did not fully consider Myanmar's ethnic politics but has proven enormously resistant to change. Thant Myint-U describes the efforts of the scholar and activist Lian Sakhong, who sought for two decades 'to draw attention to the plight of ethnic minorities in Burma. No one was interested. It was too complicated and muddied the simple story around Aung San Suu Kyi and the generals.'[77] Western governments' and donors' preference for this 'simple story' following the 2010 elections encouraged a premature sense of confidence in Myanmar's transition, in which events such as the Panglong Peace Conference and the 2015 elections were treated as evidence of enduring change rather than performative political moments. Thus countries like the United States and European Union member states, which had imposed sanctions against the military regime and supported informal tourist boycotts, now began to subsidize military training, the elections, and the peace talks, without due consideration of how these could reinforce ethnic hierarchies and have serious implications for the future protection of human rights in Myanmar.

Over the past decade there has been a general tendency among international actors to approach peacebuilding in Myanmar as a question of economic development, with a dominant focus on how this

[75] Henk van Houtum, 'Bordering, Ordering and Othering', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, vol. 93, no. 2, 2002, pp. 125–136; James W. Scott, 'Introduction: Bordering, Ordering, Othering (Almost) Twenty Years On', *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, vol. 112, no. 1, 2021, pp. 26–33.

[76] Mohammad Shahabuddin, 'Development, Peacebuilding and the Rohingya in Myanmar', *EJIL Talk*, 5 October 2020, available at https://www.ejiltalk.org/development-peacebuilding-and-the-rohingya-in-myanmar/ [accessed 15 December 2021]; Stefan Bächtold, 'The Rise of an Anti-Politics Machinery: Peace, Civil Society and the Focus on Results in Myanmar', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1968–1983.

[77] Thant Myint-U, *A Hidden History*, p. 126.

could be achieved from the centre and outwards. This approach was also very much in line with how the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi articulated peacebuilding and reconciliation. Underlying this approach was an understanding that economic growth and investments in infrastructure, job creation, and livelihoods would not only improve conditions for all inhabitants, but also resolve ethno-religious tensions.[78] However, transforming the economy could not automatically change the relations of power and distribution that have shaped the imbalanced relationship and conflicts between the Myanmar Government and the country's ethnic nationalities. Achieving peace would also require addressing the decades of othering and oppression to which non-Bamar populations have been subjected. The failure to so far address these dynamics has had consequences for various constituencies, including civil society, ethnic armed organizations and individual ethnic groups, and displaced populations (including refugees and internally displaced persons), who especially (although not exclusively) reside in the borderlands.[79] The position of displaced populations is discussed by McConnachie (in this special issue), who examines the relationship between refugee policy, peacebuilding, and border governance; in particular, considering the ways in which the premature adoption of a language of transition by international agencies has encouraged the untimely promotion of refugee return and repatriation for refugees in Thailand, India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. Her article considers the harms that have resulted from this discourse of return, including reducing international aid and attention to long-term refugee populations as well as the

[78] Shahabuddin, 'Development, Peacebuilding'.

[79] David Brenner and Sarah Schulman, 'Myanmar's Top-Down Transition: Challenges for Civil Society', *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2019, pp. 17–36; Karen Human Rights Group, *Stepping into Uncertainty: Refugee and IDP Experiences of Return in Southeast Myanmar*, published on August 2020, available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/stepping_into_uncertainty_-_english_full_report_-_august_2020_0_0.pdf, [accessed 15 December 2021]; Stefan Bächtold, 'The Rise of an Anti-Politics Machinery: Peace, Civil Society and the Focus on Results in Myanmar', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1968–1983. In August 2020, a COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) amounting to more than US$1 billion was approved by the Myanmar Government. The Plan was opposed by more than 200 organizations in a statement claiming that, 'The CERP is clearly a vehicle for the government to exploit the pandemic to fill their coffers and strengthen their hegemony—but disastrous for the ethnic peoples, and for prospects of establishing a genuine federal union, which can end the 70-year long civil war.' 'Billion-dollar loans for Naypyidaw's Covid-19 Economic Relief Plan will fuel conflict', KPSN, 20 August 2020.

trauma and distress caused to refugees. Refugees' fears and concerns surrounding return have of course been manifested by the events of 2021. Repatriation is impossible in the current circumstances of military violence and national insecurity, but no alternative solutions are possible for these people either: there is no way forward and no way back.

The case of refugees is an instructive example of how international aid following 2012 failed to question the dominant view of transition and stand up for those who are losing out under this narrative. A better approach to international peacebuilding would have centred the borderlands. Goodhand and others have suggested that development policy is characterized by 'borderland blindness' which continues to privilege the nation-state as 'the central unit of analysis and intervention', and identified the need to correct this by centring borders and bordering processes.[80] Plonski and Walton argue that applying a 'borderland lens' in this way challenges key assumptions of current peacebuilding policy and practice: that 'power and order radiate outwards from the centre of the state; that border zones are resistant to national peacebuilding and statebuilding projects because of a lack of security, development, or governance infrastructure; and that more development and greater state presence can therefore resolve challenges faced by borderland communities'.[81] If international governments, donors, and agencies had taken this approach to their investments and interventions in Myanmar, what difference might that have made? Might it have altered the trajectory of the reform process, or even averted the conditions that led to the coup? It seems improbable—but perhaps not impossible. The approach to transition from 2011–2021 largely reinforced the centralization of power rather than the rebalancing of power that true peacebuilding requires. Greater attention to the dynamics of border governance might have encouraged decentralization and devolution of power. This in turn may have reduced the competition between the 'two-headed government' that Thawnghmung and Htoo describe (in this special issue), which ultimately preserved rather than diminished military power and control.

[80] Jonathan Goodhand, Markus Mayer and Oliver Walton, 'Building Peace from the Margins: Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka and Nepal', *International Alert*, 2019, p. 1, available at: https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/BuildingPeaceFromTheMargins_EN_2019.pdf, [accessed 15 December 2021]; Zahbia Yousuf, 'Peacebuilding in Borderlands: A View from the Margins', in *Borderlands and Peacebuilding*, (eds) Plonski and Yousuf, pp. 20–25.

[81] Sharri Plonski and Oliver Walton, 'Conflict and Peace in Borderlands', in *Borderlands and Peacebuilding*, (eds) Plonski and Yousuf, pp. 5–11.

Future directions in border governance

In this special issue we have sought to analytically decentre the centrist sovereign state while remaining cognisant of its effects on borderlands and the production of borders. We have developed 'border governance' as a multidimensional concept that recognizes an often-overlooked political reality (the functioning of governance in, of, and through borders); promotes a perspectival shift that views the state from its borders (rather than the reverse); and anchors theoretical discussion of borderlands and bordering processes with empirical knowledge and understanding. The range of issues analysed by our contributors shows the generative potential of this approach while also providing further evidence of the mutually constitutive relationship between borderlands and national politics. Theoretical and conceptual insights on border governance that emerge from this collection include how everyday practices of border governance relate to and challenge dominant imaginaries of power linked to the idea of a unitary state, and the implications of everyday border governance for livelihoods and social relations among populations living in borderlands in a context of transition.

Our study of border governance demonstrates the perception shift required to 'see like a border', and the contribution of doing so. The past decade of transition has created new forms and flows of power, which are more nuanced than an imposition of power from the centre and resistance from the borders. Our contributors show the variety of governance processes operating in, of, and through borderlands while telling a compelling story of the evolving politics of power, authority, legitimacy, and vulnerability. Tracing these dynamics provides insight into the relationship between borders and statebuilding, peacebuilding and development, and shows how these political processes operate and take effect as territorializing and bordering processes.[82] The low visibility of and attention to Myanmar's borderlands enabled the illusion of transition to be sustained even in the absence of significant political change in the position of ethnic border states. As the collection of articles in this special issue shows, the position of borders and borderlands is never static. Sometimes the physical position of a border changes (as in the decades-long boundary negotiations between the governments of

[82] James Sidaway, 'The Return and Eclipse of Border Studies? Charting Agendas', *Geopolitics*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2011, pp. 969–976; Johnson et al., 'Interventions on Rethinking', p. 68.

Myanmar and Bangladesh). More often it is the *meaning* of a border that changes. The border governance approach presented in this special issue highlights the continued centrality of ethnicity in Myanmar's politics, and the role of racialized hierarchies as bordering processes in peacebuilding as well as in conflict. Prospects for lasting peace in Myanmar are closely linked to understanding these identities and correcting the inequalities and oppression that have defined centre-borderland relations for so many years.