

Understanding Myanmar in mainland China (or the lack of it): recent reflections from the field

This panel shares recent experiences of several China-born, Western-educated early career scholars on Myanmar, who have conducted fieldwork and archival research in Myanmar, China and Thailand, and disseminated academic findings across the world over the past decade. These accounts provide a vivid picture of the volatile social environment of Myanmar from the pre-2011 dictatorship, to the post-2011 transition to democracy; and most recently, the global pandemic and the ongoing repercussion from the 2021 coup. Being active practitioners in humanities across disciplines, presenters also reflect upon channels, or the lack of them, to share findings among audience in and outside of their home institutes, as well as in Myanmar and China, with curious mixture of opportunities and challenges from the academic colleagues, the authorities, the civil society, and the public.

Bearing the long-term conflicts of Myanmar in mind, this panel adopts open and up-to-date dialogues for nuanced, subtle, and sensible approaches in narratives, methodology and practice. Furthermore, by sharing unique experience through non-White and non-Burmese eyes, it engages with the current debate on decolonising the Burma Studies (Charney 2021, Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung 2021) by offering a diverse and non-binary dimension.

Beiyin Deng, in her anthropological work, explores the misunderstandings surrounding a well-revered Buddha statue, originally from Myanmar and is now located in Shanghai. Xu Peng discusses her archival research to examine formation and varied degrees of success of ethnic militias along the Sino-Myanmar border. Annie Tong addresses her effort in balancing the quantitative and qualitative approaches when conducting her research of political science regarding the association between the survival and operation of the ethnic armed organizations/EAOs and the illicit economies on which these groups rely. Chenxue You traces the historical development of often misleading, sometimes damaging, mutual stereotypes (such as *Tayo*ke) in Myanmar and China.

As professionals trained under Western disciplinary traditions yet individuals born and bred in mainland China in the Open-Door era, we walk a fine line, often with conflict and confusion, between ‘a counterweight to prevalent Euro- and US-centrism’ (Xie 2021) and a ‘Southeast Asianist’ (Heryanto, 2002) outside of Southeast Asia– but close in geography and in subject matters.

Convener and discussant:

Yi Li. Aberystwyth University

Presenters:

Beiyin Deng. Arizona State University

Xu Peng. SOAS University of London

Annie Tong. Northern Illinois University

Chenxue You. National University of Singapore