Informal Governance in China's Border Controls

Abstract

State borders everywhere have been flooded with illegal migration, smuggling, and suitcase trading. The omnipresence of cross-border shadow exchanges shows that most smugglers are able to circumvent border control. This is paradoxical because border passages are usually guarded by militarized checkpoints which represent the forefront of state power in protecting sovereignty and territoriality, defending national security, and regulating resource flow. How should we make sense of such apparent regulatory ineffectiveness?

Drawing on fieldwork findings in Sino-Russian, Sino-Kazakhstani, and Sino-Vietnamese borders, Professor Ngo compares the formal and informal practices in different checkpoints along China's borders. It reflects on the strategic incoherence in state practices, and argues that at each border checkpoint, an informal governance regime developed in parallel to the formal institutions. Such regime is highly adaptive to local circumstances, and creates an informal order of selective passage that serves the contradictory goals of different stakeholders during border crossing.