

Transnational Mobility of Chinese Criminal Networks in Southeast Asia

Many previous studies on the Chinese criminal networks have understandably come from the criminology field rather than migration studies, therefore empirical research on the migration practices of Chinese criminal networks remains limited. What structural conditions—such as porous borders, complicit local authorities, flexible migration regimes, or diaspora-based logistical infrastructures—support the mobility and persistence of these networks? Answering these questions will inform broader debates on migration governance, state capacity, and the regional circulation of illicit capital and labour. This paper argues that the mobility of transnational Chinese criminal networks is embedded within the globalisation of the Chinese economy, a neoliberal restructuring of migration regimes in Southeast Asia, and the fragmented governance of certain regional states. The outward expansion of China's economic influence—via trade, foreign investment, and diasporic ties—has not only facilitated legitimate transnational engagement but has also opened pathways for illicit actors to operate with increasing sophistication across borders. Crucially, the mobility of these networks is further enabled by liberalised immigration policies in several Southeast Asian countries, including elite visas, investor visas, and citizenship-by-investment schemes. Finally, the weak states in mainland Southeast Asia with rampant corruption and uneven border controls facilitate these criminal networks to be transnationally mobile.