Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Beyond Borders
Book Subtitle: Stories of Yunnanese Chinese Migrants of Burma
Book Author(s): Wen-Chin Chang
Published by: Cornell University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1287cz8.6

Introduction

"Three days and three nights would not exhaust my story" (wode gushi santian sanye ye shuo buwan). "Even three books would not be enough to record my story" (wode gushi sanbenshu ye xiebuwan). Over the years my informants, Yunnanese migrants of Burma/Myanmar, have frequently prefaced answers to my questions with such words. I was intrigued by these recurring phrases at the beginning. Their literal meaning must refer to many severe hardships in the experience of migration. But because only a few speakers then recounted what they considered important or appropriate for my data collecting, these phrases seemed to indicate reticence—perhaps a gentle refusal—regarding my inquiries. In-depth sharing of life stories came later, only after the relationship between us took shape. Such sharing often resulted from my informants' recognition of my repeated visits over several years and of my increased knowledge of their lives. Sometimes their agreement to talk was triggered by a particular moment—my presence or involvement in a tense family affair or my good appetite for Yunnanese food. As I accumulated life stories, little by little, I came to

comprehend their lives' many dramatic disruptions, caused by political turmoil, ethnic conflicts, and economic constraints, and also realized their profound wish to tell how their biographies interplay with the region's geopolitics. The more we got to know each other, the more they told their histories, characterizing themselves in remarkable detail. Not only were many of them good storytellers, but they actively wanted to have their stories recorded in written form (and they would check with me from time to time about the progress of my writing).[1] Initial rhetorical declinations were gradually transformed into invitations to record their migratory lives.

In this book I retell many of these Yunnanese migrants' stories, illustrating not only their lived experiences but also what they expressed of their thinking, feeling, intimacies, courage, ambition, and despair. These experiences, thoughts, and emotions, which involve their inner selves and their relationships with other people and external environments, highlight their agency and individuality. At the same time they reflect a complex history of contemporary Yunnanese migration, first from Yunnan, in southwestern China, to Burma, and then, for some, from Burma to other places. These movements coincided with multiple national politics during the Cold War period, involving China, Burma, Thailand, Taiwan, and the United States (Chang 1999; Ministry of Information, the Union of Burma 1953; Qin 2009; Young 1970; Zeng 1964).

I focus on migrant Yunnanese mobility and (transnational) economic ventures, the most prominent themes in their narrative accounts. In *Merchants and Migrants: Ethnicity and Trade among Yunnanese Chinese in Southeast Asia*, Ann Maxwell Hill (1998) delineates the significance of Yunnanese migration and mercantile talents. She points out their "penchant for commerce," characterized by their knowledge of markets, credit arrangements, and adaptation to local political structures, as well as their risk-taking nature. Hill's interpretation of the interplay between trade and politics illustrates an interaction between mobile Yunnanese identities and the changing circumstances of the larger social world. However, while I share Hill's focus on migration and economic ventures, I go beyond the limitations of her fieldwork, which basically took place in Chiang Mai

---

1. When my informants saw me the next time I returned, many of them raised the question: "Teacher Chang, you must have written several books, right?" Also, when they introduced other informants to me, they often said to them: "Tell your story; Teacher Chang will write it into a book."

(Thailand) (ibid., 13, 27, 95–120). I have conducted long-term research at multiple sites in several countries (as referred to in the Note on Fieldwork), and I tackle a central issue that, at the time of her fieldwork, Hill could not: the complex connection between the repeated displacements of the contemporary migrant Yunnanese and their long-distance trade involvement with a range of armed ethnic groups and official agencies.[2] Moreover, I use a different method—an individual-centered ethnography primarily based on informants' narratives—which I believe is the best way to probe the complexities of individual experiences and to challenge the usual generalizations attributed to ethnic Chinese in host societies. Informants' accounts and my own observations suggest that travel is essential to opportunities and success for migrant Yunnanese, and in the process they traverse multiple borders, including social status, class, gender, corporal, and geographical borders.

Overland Yunnanese Movement in History

For more than two thousand years, mule caravans traveled between Yunnan and upper mainland Southeast Asia.[3] However, the trading connection was only officially noted for the first time in 128 BCE by Zhang Qian, a Han envoy visiting Daxia (in present-day Afghanistan) (Sima Qian 1988), and incorporation of Yunnan into the Chinese empire as a province did not take place until the Yuan dynasty (1277–1367 CE), a period of Mongol rule. Following its conquest of Yunnan, the Yuan brought in a large number of Muslim troops and civilians from central Asia and stationed them in Yunnan. Besides these Muslims, there were Han Chinese immigrants too, but on a relatively small scale (Forbes and Henley 1997, 27–57; Hao 1998, 28; You 1994, 284–86).

---

2. Hill's limitation is largely due to the timing of her research, when it was difficult for researchers to gain access to the borderlands of northern Thailand and Burma. Nevertheless, her pioneering study laid a good foundation for further exploration.

3. Several Chinese and Western historians have devoted themselves to the study of Yunnanese history focusing on its politics, culture, or economy (e.g., Atwill 2006; Chen 1992; Fang 1982; Fang and Fang 1997; FitzGerald 1972; Giersch 2006; Hao 1998; Kuo 1941; Liu 1991; Lu 2001; Shen 1994; Stargardt 1971; Sun 2000; Wang 1997; Wang and Zhang 1993; Wiens 1954; Wu 2002; Yang 2008; You 1994).

After the Yuan conquest, Yunnanese history entered a significant chapter in terms of Han Chinese immigration. The imperial court of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE) carried out massive Chinese resettlement in this borderland to consolidate its rule. The recruited immigrants included troops (*juntun*), civilians (*mintun*), merchants (*shangtun*), and exiles (*zuixiyimin*). By the end of the dynasty the Han Chinese had become the majority ethnic group in terms of both size and political power. The Ming court also launched both military and economic explorations in upland Southeast Asia and what is now northeastern India. In a mountainous environment, courier stations and trading routes extended to different parts of the region and sustained the flow of goods through long-distance caravan trade. Because of its physical contiguity with Yunnan, Burma served as the major country for Yunnanese economic adventurism in ordinary times and for asylum in times of political unrest (Chen 1966; FitzGerald 1972; Jiang 1944; Kuo 1941; Lu 2001; Sun 2000; Wiens 1954; Yang 2008; You 1994).

The Qing (1644–1911 CE) further developed the province and by and large followed the policies of the Ming. Relocation of Han Chinese immigrants continued, and Chinese acculturation was reinforced among native ethnic groups, especially those adjacent to the Chinese (Wiens 1954; FitzGerald 1972; You 1994). Nevertheless, different ethnic forces continued to coexist in competition (Giersch 2006).

Transborder commerce continued to expand. Yunnanese Han and Muslims have been particularly active in economic exploration for long-distance trade and mining since the sixteenth century (Sun 2000, 138–55; Giersch 2006, 160). Both groups migrated to Burma, and the eventual penetration of the British and French colonial powers in upland Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century further intensified overland economic interactions. Flows of goods and of people were escalating (Kuo 1941, 30–31).

Transborder commerce depended on mules and horses, and long-distance trade required the organization of caravans. The trade also needed a large number of muleteers, a job that attracted many peasants eager to earn extra cash during the dry season. Participation in the caravan trade was thus a prominent economic activity among the Yunnanese.[4] This phenomenon was reflected in a common Yunnanese saying: qiong zou yifang ji zou

---

4. Among Yunnanese traders, the Han Chinese constitute the primary group. Other major groups include the Muslims, Yi, Bai, Naxi, Shan, and Pumi (Chiranan 1990; FitzGerald 1972; Hill 1998; Lu 2001; Wang and Zhang 1993).

chang—which means that when one was in need of money, one joined the caravan trade and traveled to places inhabited by "barbarians" (other ethnic groups), or one hoped to get lucky in the jade or mineral mines in Burma (Ma 1985; Wang 1993; Wang and Zhang 1993). To undertake trade in ethnically diversified areas, traders had to adopt the local politics of hill chiefs, just as the chiefs adopted the techniques of border feudalism institutionalized by the Chinese court (Hill 1998, 53). Many of the chiefs were said to be highly Sinicized, making use of Han cultural traits to legitimize their collection of tolls paid by traders for safe passage (Giersch 2006, 159–86; Hill 1998, 58).

Caravan trade between Yunnan and Burma continued through the two world wars.[5] After the Second World War, the region underwent political upheaval, and the Communist takeover of China in 1949 saw the flight of Yunnanese into Burma on an unprecedented scale. Because Yunnanese refugees did not have permission from the Burmese government to reside in the country, they initially moved into the mountain areas of Shan and Kachin States.

Among these refugees, a group of stragglers from the Nationalist army (the Kuomintang or KMT) and local self-defense guards from Yunnan organized themselves into guerrilla forces in 1950 under the leadership of General Li Mi. These troops received supplies from the Nationalist government in Taiwan and also the United States (Chang 1999; Ministry of Information, the Union of Burma 1953; Qin 2009; Young 1970; Zeng 1964).[6] Numerous civilian refugees gathered around the bases set up by the KMT to protect themselves from harassment by the Burmese army and other ethnic forces. However, the KMT guerrillas were disbanded in 1961 under international pressure.[7] The sole survivors of the disbandment were

---

5. During the Muslim Rebellion of 1856–1873, caravan trade was partially interrupted between Bhamo (in northern Burma) and Tengyue (present-day Tengchong in western Yunnan) (Huang 1976; Yegar 1966). But the overall trade between the two countries continued to flourish, especially in cotton and opium (Chiranan 1990; Dawson 1912).

6. The initial number of KMT stragglers in early 1950 was around 2,900 (Zeng 1964, 10, 11, 18). The forces expanded to 16,068 soldiers before the first evacuation to Taiwan in 1953 (ibid., illustration 6).

7. Compelled by a resolution from the United Nations in 1953, the KMT government disbanded the KMT forces in Burma in 1953–1954 and evacuated 6,568 people back to Taiwan (Qin 2009, 168). However, KMT guerrillas soon reorganized in Shan State. In June 1960, the number of troops increased to 9,718 (Zeng 1964, 91, 97, 229). After being defeated by the Burma army (in collaboration with troops from the People's Republic of China), the KMT forces had to conduct a second disbandment in 1961, and 4,409 people were evacuated to Taiwan (Qin 2009, 269). A portion of those evacuated in 1953–1954 and 1961 were civilians.

the Third and Fifth Armies, totaling about forty-seven hundred troops (Qin 2009, 276). The main part of these two remnant KMT armies entered northern Thailand in the early 1960s with the tacit approval of the Thai government. Their encampment along the border together with several other rebellious ethnic minorities from Burma was perceived as a buffer against the possible penetration of Thai territory by Burmese Communists (Nations 1977; Taylor 1973, 33–35).[8]

Burma did not resolve its internal division and violence in the wake of independence in 1948 (Callahan 2003; Charney 2009; Thant Myint-U 2006). Resistance against the central state by different ethnic communities succeeded the confrontation between local powers and the British colonial government and later Japanese rule. In 1962, General Ne Win ended parliamentary government (1948–1962) through a military coup. In his bid to guide the country under the ideology of the "Burmese Way to Socialism," he nationalized trade and industry. However, gross mismanagement, infrastructural weaknesses, and policy errors led to disastrous consequences: economic recession and the scarcity of essential goods. Moreover, the problems of an impoverished economy were aggravated by deep ethnic rifts.

Socioeconomic instability compelled many civilian Yunnanese refugees to follow the two remnant KMT armies into northern Thailand (though a larger number stayed behind). The troops helped their fellow refugees rehabilitate themselves in border villages that emerged as havens for later Yunnanese migrants throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Chang 2002, 2006a). Meanwhile, the KMT forces carried out transborder trade between Thailand and Burma. "The troops were caravan traders and the caravan traders were troops. Both were combined as a unit," a former KMT official wrote in his autobiography (Hu 1974, 195). Mule caravans were a major means for transporting smuggled merchandise. This particular mode of conveyance persisted into the mid-1980s, when cars primarily replaced mules. The KMT dominated the trade through the 1960s and 1970s (Chang 2002; Chao Tzang Yawnghwe 1990; Lintner 1994). They were not disbanded until the end of the 1980s. Their existence by and large coincided with that of the Ne Win regime.

---

8. I have treated the organization and leadership of the KMT guerrillas (Chang 2001, 2002) and trauma of the flight experiences among the first-generation migrants (Chang 2005, 2006b) elsewhere.

In 1988, the Burmese socialist regime collapsed as a result of a series of nationwide revolts. The succeeding military junta adopted a market-oriented economic policy and announced that the country was open for foreign investment. Many Yunnanese have moved to Yangon (Rangoon) for new economic opportunities since the mid-1990s. Taking advantage of politico-economic changes and applying their mercantile dynamism, Yunnanese in Burma engage in opportunities ranging from small trade to grand enterprises. Many of their ventures connect with transborder and transnational trade, both legal and illegal. One result of the economic success of these Yunnanese merchants has, however, been a xenophobic backlash, especially from the Burmans (the major ethnic group) who perceive the Yunnanese as opportunists and imply that their wealth has been accumulated via illicit or immoral means—collaboration with ethnic insurgents during the socialist period and with the corrupt state agents after 1988. Anti-Chinese/Yunnanese feeling has been growing; stark criticism of the group appears in the media as well as in academic writings.[9] In contrast, many Yunnanese informants tend to portray the Burmans, whom they call *laomian* (old Burmans), as lazy and untrustworthy and stress that they would not allow their children to marry them. A large number from both groups despise each other, and the gap that separates them is widening. Similar confrontations between Burmans and other ethnic minorities also exist.

In November 2010, the Burmese military junta organized a national election, which consequently transformed the junta into a semi-parliamentary government. Political and economic reforms have taken place since, including the release of hundreds of political prisoners; relaxation of media control; dialogues with the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy, and several ethnic armed groups; and changes to the exchange rate and foreign investment rules. Nevertheless, decades of ethnic conflict cannot be ended in a short time. The country still suffers from ongoing humanitarian crises, absence of the rule of law, and an institutional incapacity to cope with development.

---

9. For example, Mya Maung, a well-known Burmese scholar, strongly denounced what he called the "Chinese colonization of Mandalay" (1994, 455), characterized the "massive Chinese onslaught" (p. 458) as an "imminent threat" (p. 459), and blamed Chinese/Yunnanese traders for the "cultural decline and moral decay in Mandalay" (p. 457). Min Zin's review (2012) of cultural and media works published in Burma, especially after 1988, highlights the increasing anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiment.

According to my informants, over 80 percent of the Yunnanese in Burma today are descended from the refugees who fled Yunnan after 1949. They are second-, third-, and fourth-generation migrants.[10] The rest are offspring of earlier arrivals; some of their ancestors came to Burma many generations ago. So far, there has been very little research on the overland Yunnanese (or the overseas/maritime Chinese) in Burma.[11] The paucity of literature contrasts with the extensive studies of ethnic Chinese in other parts of Southeast Asia and the rest of the world, overwhelmingly focusing on the overseas/maritime Chinese (e.g., Bao 2005; Ma 2003; McKeown 2001; Kuhn 2008; Ong 1999; Reid 1996; Skinner 1957; Tan 1988; Wang 1991, 2001; Suryadinata 2006). The latter studies uniformly depict the overseas Chinese as trading and laboring diasporas. The contemporary Yunnanese experience is more complicated: as refugees, merchants, muleteers, miners, and soldiers, the overland Yunnanese have experienced victim, trade, labor, and military diasporas (Cohen 1997). Those who fled from Yunnan to Burma after 1949 have lived through these various modes and have continually extended their migration routes from upper mainland Southeast Asia to overseas domains (e.g., Taiwan, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore).

---

10. The refugee influxes went on through the 1970s. Since the mid-1990s, the Sino-Burmese trade has been accelerating, resulting in new waves of overland Chinese immigration. A large number of new immigrants are concentrated in northern Shan and Kachin States, and they move back and forth between China and Burma (Thant Myint-U 2011; Woods 2011). This ethnography does not discuss these newcomers.

11. There have only been a few essay publications. Mya Than (1997) presents a brief history of ethnic Chinese and their identity in Burma, largely based on old materials. Hsin-Chun Lu (2011) examines the public musical performances of Yangon's ethnic Chinese from 1949 to 1988. Hongwei Fan (2012) researches the 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Burma and argues that the Beijing government's export of the Cultural Revolution was the primary cause of the event. In addition, there have been a few doctoral dissertations. Chai Chen-hsiao (2006) investigates the ethnic Chinese living in Yangon and those who migrated from Burma to Taipei in the 1960s and to Toronto in the 1970s. Chai discusses how Burmese-Chinese in these three cities shape their identity through cultural performance and transnational connections. Duan Ying (2009) studies Chinese migrants' ethnicity and cultural citizenship in Burma. Jayde Lin Roberts (2011) explores what she calls "the ethos" of the Sino-Burmese in Yangon using four aspects: place and kinship, commerce, native languages, and Chinese New Year. Yi Li (2011) deals with the formation and representation of Chinese communities in colonial Burma.

Applying the Personal Narrative Approach

How does one present the life-worlds of migrant Yunnanese in Burma? Although having often been touched or excited by informants' narratives, I hesitated to write a book based on their personal stories. I was worried about vulnerability—my informants' security after revealing their intimate feelings, and my own academic neutrality and future access to Burma. I thought that perhaps in some late stage of my academic career many things would have changed and then it would be the appropriate time to write such a book.

The tragic Saffron Revolution in September 2007 compelled me to rethink this plan. Thousands of anonymous monks took to the streets in many cities across Burma, demanding political and economic reforms. Monks are highly respected in this primarily Buddhist country, and their protest against the military junta quickly encouraged many civilians to join them. Their concerted action was motivated by a hope for change, but it provoked a brutal crackdown by the military regime. The demonstrators' bravery contrasted with my timidity and reminded me of the urgency of telling the outside world about the lives of the people in Burma—at least those of the people I had been working with for years. In the spring of 2008, I started writing the story of Zhang Dage (chapter 1), a good friend. On May 2, 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit Burma and took nearly 140,000 lives. This sudden devastation compounded the hardships borne by the country's already destitute population.[12] It further determined my writing plan, and stories of other Yunnanese informants followed over the next several years.

Through writing, I recognized the seed of the narrative approach that had been planted by my informants. Once they got to know and trust me, wasn't their urge to tell me their stories similar to my own urge to tell those stories to the outside world? For them, I represented the outside world, a chance to transcend their sociopolitical marginality. Moreover, I am someone who writes. From time to time, I stressed to them that there had been very little written history on the migrant Yunnanese, and that I was interested in reconstructing it. But the unavoidable question arises: Am I appropriating their narrativity, or are they appropriating my academic position?

---

12. More than 2.4 million people were affected by the disaster (Yeni 2009).

Perhaps it is a mutual appropriation. Notwithstanding the answer, what is meaningful for inquiry hinges on the issue of intersubjectivity—how I relate to my informants and vice versa, and how my informants themselves relate to other people and entities in their narrations and practices. Digging into these questions helps disclose different facets of one's selfhood (whether mine or my informants') and one's multiple positions in relation to power.

Narration reveals fragments of realities or distortions of realities (Behar 1993; Bruner 1987; Cattell and Climo 2002; King 2000; Neisser and Fivush 1993; Nguyen 2009). All stories are unfinished and incomplete. Life goes on, and what the ethnographer has collected and written about projects only partial lives of the research subjects (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Denzin 1991, 68–69; Langness and Frank 1981; Ochs and Capps 1996, 21; Riessman 1993, 16; Waterson 2007, 24). In the field, I have repeatedly witnessed fragmentation, inconsistency, and contradiction in informants' accounts. I was often puzzled and sometimes impatient or even angry. Informants' narrations and my responses display our dialogic relationship (Portelli 1997; Waterson 2007, 17–20). I have integrated my interaction with the narrators when that integration helps illuminate the ethnographic situation for purposes of analysis. Still, the protagonists are my informants; I merely play a supporting role. Some stories may appear to end abruptly. It is, however, my intention to situate those moments of abruptness into the ethnographic setting.

During the course of fieldwork, my gender as a female has played a role. In terms of spatial movement, I had greater freedom when interacting with female informants. I could accompany them in both domestic and public spaces. We carried on our conversations in the kitchen, the courtyard, the bedroom, the living room, the market, the Guanyin temple, and so on. Moreover, I joined in their work, such as cooking, folding paper money, and cleaning, while conducting my interviews. In contrast, my meetings with male informants took place in formal sites, mostly in the living room and sometimes in shops, mosques, Chinese schools, and Yunnanese associations. I felt more able to ask women questions about private matters, such as family relationships. Although I come from a society very different from the women's and have different life experiences, a common identity based on womanhood exists between us, whereby I could probe their world of intimacy, especially in relation to their bodies and the other

sex. In interactions with male informants, however, the gender boundary always exists, especially vis-à-vis senior male informants. While respecting that boundary by avoiding sensitive issues, I tried to obtain complementary information from other family members.

While listening to informants, I travel with them in my imagination and learn about how their traveling interacts with their livelihoods, family relationships, regional politics, religious networks (among the Yunnanese Muslims), local knowledge, gender, and space. Constantly, their narrations reveal a temporal consciousness that interweaves with their "inner life processes and affective states," or what we can term "subjectivity" (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007, 6), which embodies both liminality and agency in an ongoing process of construction and change.[13] Resonating with many other anthropologists' findings, the informants' stories not only convey valuable data, I have found, but also shed light on the cultural meanings inherent in their commentaries (e.g., Marcus and Fischer 1986, 54, 58; Riessman 1993, 1; Thompson 1988; Waterson 2007, 10–12). An essential task of this ethnography is thus to enliven informants' narrative power and unpack the invested meanings (rather than factual accuracy) embedded in their narratives.

Along with oral accounts, I have also collected texts written by Yunnanese migrants—letters, essays, poems, records of family genealogy, and autobiographies. These oral and written sources help me reconstruct the trajectories of the migrant Yunnanese movement and economic participation. In writing, I have tried to preserve the "thickness" of narrators' stories by using first-person narratives as much as possible. Their personal accounts compose the main body of the ethnography.

Needless to say, the stories my informants tell are predicated on their particular viewpoints, with which other ethnic groups (or even other Yunnanese migrants) may not agree. However, these viewpoints speak to who these narrators are and also portray the entanglements between them and

---

13. This understanding of subjectivity, stressing its processual formation, is advocated by many researchers (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1993; Belsey 1991; Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; Cohen 1997; Crapanzano 1980; Ellis and Flaherty 1992; Fischer 2003; Hall 2004; Herzfeld 1996; Hirschman 1995; Thompson 1998). Biehl, Good, and Kleinman propose an "ethnographic study of subjectivity," aiming to "investigate subjectivity in contemporary settings of economic crisis, state violence, exploited migrant communities, massive displacements, hegemonic gender politics, and postcolonial state" (2007, 15, 10).

a series of external contexts, ranging from near (and dear) to far (and unfamiliar) environments along their peripatetic movement. These entanglements parallel what Anna Tsing terms "frictions," a metaphor she uses to probe the disparities and unevenness in the development of global capitalism. She explores how seemingly isolated rain forest dwellers (the Meratus Dayaks) in Kalimantan, Indonesia, encounter national and global forces and are shaped and transformed in a process intriguingly characterized by embedded connections as well as conflicts and contradictions involving different layers of power structure (2005). With reference to the concept, I delve into Yunnanese migrants' persistent struggle against numerous external constraints. While Tsing focuses more on a structural dimension, I try to knit individuals' experiences with contextual elements to illuminate the intertwinement of their subjectivities and encountered frictions.

Shifting Focus from Central State to Borderland

While adopting a personal narrative approach, I take a transborder/transnational perspective for analysis. In light of the migrant Yunnanese's unrecognized refugee status during the initial stages of resettlement, their movement from a frontier province (Yunnan) to another frontier region (Shan and Kachin States of Burma and border areas of northern Thailand), and their participation in the underground cross-border trade, the migrant Yunnanese of Burma give us a remarkable opportunity to contribute to borderland studies.

The concept of "borderland" has by and large been associated with periphery, wasteland, backwardness, and lawlessness. It is in sharp contrast to the ideas of center, civilization, progress, and law and order. Such dualistic thinking results from the political ideology underlying state-building—the borderland is something to be tamed and controlled by the central state (Baud and van Schendel 1997; Chou 2005; Horstmann and Wadley 2006; Scott 2009; Walker 1999, 7). This top-down ideology stresses absolute national sovereignty and rules out notions of flexible or negotiable boundaries (Donnan and Wilson 1994, 1). It accepts national boundaries as a "given," and it subjugates borderlands; the subjectivity of borderlanders and trans-borderlanders is purposefully ignored. Likewise, those belonging to the categories of social borderland, such as women, ethnic

minorities, the Green Party, and the laboring class, are often consciously or subconsciously considered inferior and perceived as needing governance by their "central" counterparts. The demarcation is based on differences in power position, drawing a strict line of inclusion and exclusion (Donnan and Wilson 1999; High 2009; Johnson and Michaelsen 1997, 20; Lugo 1997).

After the Second World War this sociopolitical mainstream of governance continued to dominate academia and the political arena. In the 1960s more social protest emerged, such as the civil rights movement, the New Left, and the feminist movement (see Freedman 2003; Mattson 2002; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1998). Alternative voices called for recognition of social inequalities on the periphery and among the oppressed. Since then some subaltern communities have successfully challenged the orthodox hegemony and compelled the center to release resources to them; others have failed in their appeals. Whatever the result, their endeavors have inspired new directions in academic research that involve rethinking the traditional demarcation between the center and the periphery.

A burgeoning literature on liminal borderlands relating to gender, marginal people, culture, migration, environment, and underground trade has illuminated the dynamism of the peripheral and pointed out the fact of unidentified interstices in individual subjectivities and social categories (e.g., Anzaldúa 1987; Butler 1990; Chou 2010; Gilroy 1993; Hall and Du Gay 1996; Jonsson 2005; Ortner 1996; Scott 2009; Sturgeon 2005; Tagliacozzo 2005; Tsing 1993; van Schendel 2005; Warren 2007). It makes us look into the agency of borderlands embedded or hidden in our lives or marginal communities. Prevalent political discourse focusing solely on state-centeredness or mainstream social ideologies is being debated—it is from this angle that Renato Rosaldo, for example, probes the complexities of the life-world and suggests that instead of living in the "supposedly transparent cultural selves," our everyday practices are intersecting with "structure" and "agency" (1993, 104). Behind the façade of ascribed political or sociocultural identities, everyone embodies a part of the unidentified borderland that facilitates everyday life. This viewpoint reminds us of E. R. Leach's classic ethnography, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, which set an example in the field of social organization more than half a century ago (1954). Leach's work illustrates the oscillating reality of the tribal identity and sociopolitical structures of Kachin societies as they interact with

the Shans in the face of change.[14] "Every real society is a process in time," Leach said (1993, 4), and so is every human being, embracing an inevitably changing nature that opens itself to transformation. The ongoing process is often full of fragmentation and inconsistency, in contrast to a superficial belief in structural coherence. Borderlands, be they metaphorical or geographical, should therefore "be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation" (Rosaldo 1993, 207–8), and the field of everyday practices should be the focus of inspection.

With regard to the southwestern China and Southeast Asia region, many recent works have discarded the unified state–oriented approach to shed light on issues of borderlands. For example, Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped* (1994) is a masterpiece on the nation-building of modern Thailand. He deconstructs the creation of the modern Thai "geo-body" and demonstrates the fixation of its national boundaries by appropriating mapmaking technologies. C. Patterson Giersch's *Asian Borderlands* (2006) looks into the political, economic, and social interactions between the indigenous people and Chinese official agents and immigrants in Yunnan during the Qing period and redefines the frontier as a "'middle ground' [a meeting place] in which social boundaries and cultural practices were in flux" (p. 7). Andrew Walker's *The Legend of the Golden Boat* (1999) examines cooperation in the Upper Mekong area. His ethnographic findings lead to the conclusions that the transnational movements of the Quadrangle region are the latest in a series of regimes of Upper Mekong regulation, and that "state (and non-state) regulation is intrinsically involved in the creation of the contexts in which markets flourish" (p. 14). From an ecological approach, Janet C. Sturgeon's *Border Landscapes* (2005) explores the landscape plasticity of two border Akha communities, located respectively in southwestern China and northern Thailand. She illustrates the appropriation processes by showing how these two communities turn their border landscapes from topography and land cover to "sites for maneuvering and struggle" by resorting to their sociopolitical tradition (p. 9).

---

14. Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma* is a milestone in ethnic studies; it looks into interacting social systems between groups and their consequent influences on identities. However, researchers working on the Kachin have since contested Leach's oversimplified construction of the two ideal political systems (*gumlao* and *gumsa*), as well as other flaws (see Robinne and Sadan 2007).

These works are geographically and theoretically related to my study of cross-border and transnational movement among migrant Yunnanese, between Yunnan, Burma, Thailand, and other places. The common thread uniting them is their consensus on the interlinking of forces that operate along constantly changing borders across time and space. They dismiss a simplified center-periphery model and look into borderlands in process. While recognizing the modern political trend in the formation of nation states, their analyses are not confined to the borders of a specific country. The other side of the border, in imagination or in practice, is also under investigation. Their works, in effect, articulate the subjectivities of border-landers and offer new frames of analysis that go beyond the restriction of national boundaries.

Throughout history, Yunnanese mobility has resulted in the establishment of diasporic Yunnanese communities and transnational networks in a large stretch of land. Taking a transborder and transnational perspective, I look beyond governmental institutions and probe the migratory and mercantile agency of the diasporic Yunnanese. More specifically, I ask: Who are these Yunnanese migrants? Why and how have they undertaken ongoing movement and a range of underground and transborder trades? What have been their impacts upon local, regional, and transnational structures? And how has their persistent traveling affected Yunnanese diasporic communities? I use such concepts as friction, traveling culture, the transnational popular realm, gendered geography of power, and circulation to analyze this population's migration and economic engagements. Ultimately, I hope not only to make the voice of the migrant Yunnanese heard, but also to de-center Burmese national history and challenge the central state's political power in deciding inclusion and exclusion in social, economic, and political policy making.

The Shape of the Book

By choosing protagonists who belong to multiple generations, who have had different migration experiences, who practice a range of professions and are located in various places, I provide, in part one of the book, a grounding for an understanding of contemporary Yunnanese migration history. Chapters 1 to 3 cover the migratory experiences of four narrators

through different life stages, providing insights into their inner selves as well as life in Shan State. Their narratives unveil the intertwinement of their subjectivities with historical contingent circumstances, infused with a range of sentiments (hope, loss, pain, desire, ambition, alienation, anxiety, ambivalence) and forceful tensions (love, hate, jealousy, anger, confusion). These intricate emotions are often tied to complexities involving their families, ethnic others, and states and societies. These protagonists speak about their ongoing attempts to realize their ambitions. Chapter 4 also deals with personal migration history, but among the Yunnanese Muslims. The narrators relate their marginality in Burma, owing to both their ethnicity and their religion, and talk about how they deal with this marginality through Islamic networking beyond Burma. Although these stories at first sight seem individual, on closer look they echo one another, demonstrating the narrators' motifs and strategies to overcome obstacles and adversities in order to reach their goals. Moreover, they thread together two common themes referred to by James Clifford—"roots" and "routes" (1994)—to portray how the narrators understand their life trajectories in relation to time, localities, peoples, and their multiple roles or positions. Concretely, I illustrate the craving (for certain places and people), crafting (of their narrated memories), and contrasting (of the inconsistencies and contradictions) in their narratives to reveal the divergent facets of their subjectivities as diasporans and the complexity of Burmese society in relation to its multiethnic structure and oppressive military rule.

After the delineation of these several peripatetic lives, part two of the book underpins the group's economic activities by exploring borderland livelihoods, gendered economies, and spatial flows. Chapter 5 examines the cross-border trade undertaken by male Yunnanese migrants between Burma and Thailand during the era of the Burmese socialist regime. It reconstructs the organization of the trade (mostly via mule caravans), its trading routes and traded commodities, and analyzes the sociocultural meanings underlying this venture. Although Yunnanese traders view borderlands as barbarous, their efforts to maintain reciprocity with autochthonous groups and respect their rules, in effect, negates the perception. Complementing this focus on the long-distance trade by Yunnanese men, chapter 6 examines the economic involvement of Yunnanese women. Their narratives illuminate the social construction of gender inequalities in relation to power distribution in both public and domestic spheres. Their

engagement highlights an ongoing process of shaping and reshaping "gendered geographies of power" (Mahler and Pessar 2001) that reflects their mercantile keenness, frustration, and pain. While their practices contest existing gender categories, they also reproduce these categories. Chapter 7 explores the transnational jade trade dominated by migrant Yunnanese since the 1960s, owing to their well-connected transnational networks. My focus is on the traders' dynamism in the formation of their transnational networks and the flows of capital in response to the politico-economic policies adopted by different states. Their business extension to Guangzhou and Hong Kong since 2000 has resulted in the merging of traditional overland connections with newly established maritime links. Although coverage of the economic activities among the migrant Yunnanese in the second part is not comprehensive, the issues dealt with embrace an essential part of the group's economic life.

All the stories narrated here, flowing from individuality to a group concern, point to contemporary Yunnanese migrants' mobility and their relentless efforts in pursuit of a better life. Either the protagonists or their family members have experiences of flight. Repeated changes in environment result in status and class shifts and compel them to take up a wide range of jobs to make ends meet. In contrast to voluminous studies of overseas Chinese since the 1990s (e.g., Cohen 1997; Ma 2003; Ong 1999; Ong and Nonini 1997; Pan 1994), which have been critiqued as too "optimistic" and "class-based" (concentrating on the middle class) (Ty and Goellnicht 2004, 8), these stories of contemporary Yunnanese migrants attest to fluidity in social status and class. There was never an absolute division between traders and laborers, for the latter could also engage in small-scale trade, and the former could in turn suddenly lose all their profits and become muleteers or jade miners. In addition to status and class interchangeability, the protagonists cross a series of borders in relation to gender, body, and geography, highlighting their resilience. Borders for them hold different meanings in different situations, and their lives are marked by a series of border transcendences in their daily worlds (cf. Rosaldo 1993, 207–8).

Migrant Yunnanese mobility attests to the prevalence of travel by "many different kinds of people" (Clifford 1992, 107) rather than just the privileged. Their narratives of movement not only disclose individual life processes but also illustrate networks of connections, modes of transportation, gendered differentiation, and flows of diverse objects. Through

traveling they have carried on the mobile livelihoods of their predecessors, who ranged over the historical borderlands between Yunnan and upland Southeast Asia, and they have even expanded overland travel to journeys by land, by sea, and by air.

By applying a personal narrative approach, drawing on different forms of narratives given by a range of Yunnanese migrants, I attempt to build a general historical background while digging into concrete lived experiences. My primary objective is to accomplish what the oral historian Alessandro Portelli has advocated, "to explore [the distance and bond between the personal experience and history], to search out the memories in the private, enclosed space of houses and kitchens and … to connect them with 'history' and in turn force history to listen to them" (1997, viii). The stories that follow, I hope, open a window upon the migrant Yunnanese as well as the societies in which they are situated.