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YUNNANESE CHINESE IN MYANMAR:
PAST AND PRESENT

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Yunnanese Chinese in Myanmar: Past and Present

By Yi Li

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There is a long history of Chinese activities in Myanmar. The largest wave of Chinese migration to Myanmar (then British Burma) occurred in the nineteenth century; it brought two major regional groups of immigrants: the Hokkien/Cantonese who took the maritime route and the Yunnanese who took the overland route across the border.
- The Yunnanese community in Mandalay has been well established at least since the mid-eighteenth century, mainly due to cross-border trade. Mandalay remains an important centre for Yunnanese Chinese in northern Myanmar.
- After the Second World War, many Chinese entered Myanmar for political, military and economic reasons. They often settled in the northern hills and eventually moved down to lowland towns. Since the late 1980s, some of them have further moved to southern Myanmar, especially Yangon.
- Yangon Chinatown has been traditionally shared between the Hokkien and the Cantonese Chinese since colonial times. Recent years have seen the arrival and establishment of wealthy and influential Yunnanese, and the community is fast becoming the biggest group of ethnic Chinese in the former capital of Myanmar.
- Chinese language education has been better maintained by the Yunnanese in the north than by their southern counterparts during the post-war period despite numerous difficulties. This has resulted in a major division, in terms of language proficiency and cultural outlook, between the Yunnanese Chinese in the north and the Hokkien/Cantonese Chinese in the south.

- The Chinese in Myanmar hold a common and strong victim's discourse although the emphasis is different between the north and the south.
- It is hard to differentiate between anti-Chinese and anti-China sentiments in the country. Nonetheless, the Yunnanese generally are not too concerned about the recent anti-Chinese/anti-China sentiment; they also hold different opinions on many China-related issues from Myanmar intellectuals and the general public.
- The general resentment against ethnic Chinese in Myanmar may be exploited in the country's future political tussles.

Yunnanese Chinese in Myanmar: Past and Present¹

By Yi Li²

This article investigates the past and present situations of the Yunnanese Chinese in Myanmar, whose ancestors from western Yunnan have had a long history of interactions with consecutive Burmese kingdoms and British Burma over the past centuries. Despite a recent wave of relocation to Yangon and southern regions over the last two to three decades, the majority of the Yunnanese continues to live in northern Myanmar, a region that is the focus of this study. The article first provides a brief historical review of this group's establishment and development in Mandalay, northern Myanmar and Yangon. It then looks at the cultural and educational developments of the community in post-war Myanmar, which are very different from those of their Hokkien and Cantonese counterparts in southern Myanmar and which play a decisive role in shaping the cultural and ethnic perspectives of this group. Lastly, it reflects on the differences and similarities between the Yunnanese and Hokkien/Cantonese groups of the ethnic Chinese in Myanmar in the contemporary context.

¹ This article is based on interviews and observations in cities and towns throughout Myanmar between 2007 and 2015, in particular an extensive research trip in northern Myanmar in March 2015. To reflect the historical progress, it uses colonial English names (Burma, Rangoon, etc.) for the colonial period, and the Romanised names recognised by the current government (Myanmar, Yangon, etc.) for the contemporary context.

² Yi Li was commissioned by ISEAS to write this article for its project on the Chinese in Southeast Asia. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow, History Programme, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, at Nanyang Technological University.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The migration of the Chinese to the land of what is Myanmar today started early. A second-century B.C. Chinese dynastic chronicle records a Han envoy's finding of "cloth and bamboo sticks" from Sichuan, a southwestern landlocked province of China, in a Central Asian market in the ancient Bactrian region. When the envoy asked the source of these products, he was told that they were transported from *shendu* 身毒 (the ancient Chinese name for India).³ This implies an ancient route linking southwestern China and northern India, most likely through present-day northern Myanmar. Being a southwestern neighbour of China, ancient Myanmar has often been mentioned in Chinese dynastic chronicles, either as a tributary country in peacetime or as a destination for refugees in wartime. For instance, a *Piao* 驃 (the Chinese name for ancient Myanmar that is related to the Pyu civilization) troupe of musicians and dancers was well received at the Tang court in 801; the Mongol Army invaded Pagan in the late thirteenth century; the last Ming emperor surrendered in the outskirts of the Burmese capital, Ava, in 1661; and, most recently, the Sino-Burmese War occurred during the Qing dynasty in the 1760s. Each episode stimulated new waves of exchanges of people, goods and ideas. On the other hand, the premodern inter-Asian maritime network connected ports between southeast China and southern Myanmar (especially the coastal areas in Tanintharyi). The Martaban jar, a glazed black stoneware used as a storage vessel on board ships, was named after the southern Myanmar port Martaban (present-day Mottama) and could be found widely in Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia from the fourteenth century onwards.⁴

The land frontier between southwest China and northern Myanmar and the water frontier across the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea

³ Ban Gu, *Han Shu 61: Zhangqian Liguangli Zhuan* (Book of Han Vol. 61: Biographies of Zhang Qian and Li Guangli).

⁴ For information on the maritime trade in this area, see, for instance, Pamela Gutman, "The Martaban Trade: An Examination of the Literature from the Seventh Century until the Eighteenth Century", *Asian Perspectives* 40, no. 1 (2001): 108–18.

have always been fluid and open. Although the Chinese had long taken the caravan routes to visit ancient Myanmar, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century, during and after three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–26, 1852 and 1885), that large numbers of Chinese immigrants entered British Burma through both overland routes from Yunnan and overseas routes from Fujian, Guangdong and other Southeast Asian ports such as Penang.⁵ The Cantonese and Hokkien Chinese immigrants were often based in the colonial capital of Rangoon, the nearby Irrawaddy Delta and Lower Burma, and they developed their communal life following similar patterns in Penang, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries and colonies where the Cantonese and Hokkien had been successfully established by then. In the meantime, the Yunnanese Chinese entered Upper Burma using long-established caravan routes through rugged terrains. Their most significant, and the longest established settlement was Mandalay, the last capital of the Burmese kingdom, which remained the cultural and religious centre even after final annexation in 1886.

Mandalay

Mandalay, or more precisely, the capital of several recent Burmese dynasties, has been the destination of travelling merchants from western Yunnan for centuries. The Chinese temple in Amarapura, a southern Mandalay suburb today and the twice-royal capital (1783–1821 and 1842–59) of the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), was built no later than 1773. This was not long after the conclusion of the Sino-Burmese War; cross-border trade, which had been interrupted by the war and official bans, was resumed. Officially known as the Amarapura Guanyin Temple, it became the centre of the Yunnanese settlement in the then Burmese capital, and its surrounding area is still renowned for the Burmese weaving industry today. Indeed, cotton and silk were the major commodities of this cross-

⁵ Purcell defines two types of Chinese people in colonial Burma: the “Maritime” Chinese (the Hokkien and Cantonese) and the “Mountain” Chinese (the Yunnanese). Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

border caravan trade, and profits from them, along with “local products from Beijing and Canton”,⁶ made significant financial contributions to the renovation and maintenance of this Yunnanese temple. Like many other migrant Chinese communities at that time, it also functioned as the informal community centre for Yunnanese travellers and sojourners and managed the communal cemetery not far from the temple site.

Yunnanese merchants were regular participants at the Burmese court by then. In 1857, King Mindon (r. 1853–78) founded the new royal capital of Mandalay. In Mandalay, the blocks southwest of the Royal Palace became the new Chinese quarter (along 80th Street today). The local legend claims that during Mindon’s time, one leader of the Yunnanese community, a successful trader, contributed to the design and construction of the new capital and the Royal Palace. As a result, the land where the Mandalay Yunnanese Association now stands was granted free to the city’s (Yunnanese) Chinese residents by the king as a token of appreciation. The Yunnanese Association in Mandalay was therefore officially established, separating itself from the temple in Amarapura. After the final annexation, Cantonese and Hokkien Chinese, previously concentrated in Lower Burma, also moved up to Mandalay in groups, partly thanks to the improved transportation system: steamships plied regularly on the Irrawaddy, and the railway was extended from Rangoon to Mandalay in 1889. Soon afterwards, several important community associations and temples for the Hokkien and the Cantonese were also established on and around 80th Street.

Throughout the colonial and post-colonial eras, Mandalay has remained an important location for the Yunnanese Chinese in Myanmar, while the population of the Cantonese and Hokkien Chinese has dwindled after independence. The Yunnanese Association has organized community activities since the end of the war, and cultural and commercial connections with Yunnan have been significantly enhanced, especially since the late 1980s.

⁶ *Chongxiu guanyinsi gongde xiaoyin* (The Inscription for the Renovation of the Guanyin Temple), *daoguang 26 nian* (1846).

The Northern Hills

If, historically, merchants from western Yunnan made the Burmese capital their business operational centre, the views from their less-well-off fellow countrymen were not too different. For poor residents in western Yunnan, Myanmar had always been a place of adventure. They hoped that by working there as labourers in jade and other precious stone mines deep in the mountains, they could change their luck. A well-circulated proverb in western Yunnan best exemplifies this dream, saying “if one is poor, go to the foreign lands; if one is desperate, go to the mines” (*qiongzou yifang jizou chang*). The jade mines of Kachin State and the ruby and silver mines of Shan State have been well known for generations in the western Yunnan countryside. The products from these mines, especially jadeite, have been extremely popular for centuries throughout China.

This adventurous tradition continued well into the colonial era, until the Japanese invasion in 1942. The invasion temporarily reversed the flow of the Chinese population, as refugees from war-torn Southeast Asia fled to southwest China for safety, often via the Burma Road. The end of the war saw the resumption and, to some extent, the enhancement of the Chinese moving from Yunnan to post-war Myanmar due to dramatic changes in China after the mid-1940s. The Nationalist Army remaining in Yunnan was forced to leave China and launched guerrilla warfare in northern Myanmar and northern Thailand in full-scale or paramilitary units for a considerable number of years.⁷ On the civilian side, Yunnanese landowners and other families with “counter-revolutionary” elements in the years immediately after 1949, families of the above-mentioned Nationalist Army soldiers, and disoriented youth all over China undergoing rural re-education in remote areas (including Yunnan) during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), among many others, found crossing the border to Myanmar a realistic option to escape the frustrations and

⁷ Wen-Chin Chang, “Beyond the Military: The Complex Migration and Resettlement of the KMT Yunnanese Chinese in Northern Thailand”, PhD dissertation, K.U. Leuven, 1999.

threats in Communist China. Of course, during the height of anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar in the 1960s, cross-border movement occurred in both directions, and it was not rare for ethnic Chinese originally from the Myanmar hills to find new lives in Yunnan and other parts of China. Despite official demarcation (the current border was finalized in 1960) and reinforced border controls, the frontier between western Yunnan and northern Myanmar retained a certain degree of “freedom” in practice. The fact that this region has been under the control of various ethnic militias for the majority of the past six decades and became the base of anti-Yangon resurgences of ethnic and political forces has certainly contributed to the continuous fluidity. Over the years, the Yunnanese Chinese, many of whom originally settled in mountainous villages to minimize direct confrontation with various and constant conflicts, slowly moved down to lowland towns in Shan State and Kachin State due to changing political and military conditions. In those lowland towns, their access to principle roads and railways and their interactions with the ethnic Burman and government agencies were significantly increased.

In the late 1980s, Yangon reached ceasefire agreements with most of the ethnic rebel forces. This became the next turning point for the Yunnanese Chinese. When peace was (somewhat) restored in many parts of this region, the Yunnanese Chinese realized that tight restrictions on local residents’ mobility, previously tying them to a very limited space and putting them under constant government monitoring, were finally loosened. This decade also saw the normalization of the Sino-Burmese border and the encouragement of cross-border trade from both sides. By then, most of the ethnic Chinese of Yunnanese origins had acquired Myanmar citizenship in one way or another; they migrated south, aiming for more commercial opportunities and better living standards. The most obvious destination in the 1990s was Yangon, the then capital of Myanmar.

Yangon

Early records about the ethnic Chinese in Yangon almost always refer to the Hokkien and Cantonese groups. In the late eighteenth century, a Chinese traveller observed that “Western products were assembled in

Rangoon before being transported to Canton and Hokkien”.⁸ A British Army officer in the First Anglo-Burmese War, after taking over Rangoon, remembered an encounter with the local Cantonese residents on the eve of the Chinese New Year in 1825.⁹ The military map used by the British Army in the war clearly marked a “China Wharf” along the Rangoon River,¹⁰ not far from the harbour in the Chinatown today, indicating the existence of a Chinese settlement before the arrival of colonial power in the early nineteenth century.

When the British annexed Rangoon in 1852 after the Second Anglo-Burmese War, an urban development scheme was immediately planned to make Rangoon a modern colonial city. In charge of this plan were two British officials with sufficient experience of managing multi-ethnic urban centres in British Asia: one from Calcutta (the capital of the British Indian Empire) and the other from Singapore (the most important city in the Straits Settlements). It was, therefore, not surprising that the result was a perfect example with neatly segregated ethnic quarters designated for its European and various foreign Asian residents.

⁸ Anonymous, “Miankao” (circa 1790), in *Dian Xi*, ed. Shi Fan (Yunnan Tongzhiju, 1887).

⁹ Chen Yi-Sein, “Yangguang Guangdong Gongsì (Guanyin Gumiao) Shilue” [A Brief History of the Association [Guanyin Temple], in *Yangguang Guangdong Gongsì (Guanyin Gumiao) 179 Zhounian ji Chongxiu Luocheng Jinian Tekan* [Special Memorial Edition for the 179th Anniversary of the Rangoon Cantonese Company (the Ancient Temple of Guanyin) and its Renovation], (Yangon: Yangguang Guangdong Gongsì, 2004), p. 20. The original English account cited by Chen is from Bennett, “Burma and the Burmese during the Late War”, *United Service Journal* Part III (1838): 80–81.

¹⁰ Chen Yi-Sein, “The Chinese in Rangoon during the 18th and 19th Centuries”, *Artibus Asiae Supplementum* 23, Essays Offered to G. H. Luce by His Colleagues and Friends in Honour of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday. Volume 1: Papers on Asian Religion, Languages, Literature, Music Folklore, and Anthropology (1966): 107–11. The map referred to by Chen is from Henry Lister Maw, *Memoir of the Early Operations of the Burmese War: Addressed to the Editor of the United States Journal* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co, 1832).

In Rangoon, like in many other British colonies in the region, the Indians and the Chinese were the two most important Asian migrant groups that supplied capital and labourers to this colonial state. Rangoon Chinatown was located to the west of the city centre, next to Indian Town. It occupied a few blocks on both sides of the city's east-west thoroughfare. Although throughout the colonial period, the Chinese barely accounted for 2 per cent of the national population, and around five per cent in Rangoon,¹¹ Chinatown was an unmistakable indicator of the commercial prosperity and social establishment of the Chinese in colonial Burma. Here, one could find traditional communal temples and associations, shop houses and residences, just as one may find in contemporary Penang, Bangkok or Batavia. The southern half of Chinatown customarily belonged to the Hokkien, while the northern half belonged to the Cantonese.

However, it would be wrong to exclude the Yunnanese Chinese from the scene.¹² At least after the turn of the twentieth century, Yunnanese businessmen, attracted by the city's excellent commercial and administrative facilities, started to expand their operations to Rangoon. Although the estimated Yunnanese population at that time was much lower than the populations of the Hokkien and the Cantonese, the Yunnanese managed to establish themselves at the heart of the Rangoon Chinatown from the beginning. The first premise of the Rangoon Yunnanese Association (officially established in 1912) was in the southern (Hokkien) half of the Chinatown. It was on Latter Street, one of the major north-south streets in the Chinese quarter. This community centre was located directly opposite some of the most important Hokkien communal institutions and not far from the Cantonese temple. This site remained a public property of the community, despite many ups and downs during and after WWII.

After Myanmar's independence in 1948, the Yunnanese Chinese population in Yangon remained small but the communal activities never

¹¹ Government of India, *Census of India*, 1881–1931.

¹² Most of the information in this section comes from the author's interviews with the Yangon Yunnanese Association in November 2008 and November 2014.

stopped. As one of the three major ethnic Chinese regional groups in Yangon, the Yunnanese maintained their networks and made due contributions to social welfare and communal occasions whenever such protocol was required. In the late 1980s, large numbers of the Yunnanese Chinese started to relocate to Yangon under various circumstances, including some of the most-wanted “war lords/drug lords” in the northern hills, such as Law Sit Han or Lo Hsing Han 罗星汉, who had been active in Kokang, and Khun Sa or Chang Chi-fu 张奇夫 from Shan State and northern Thailand. Both of them claimed a certain degree of ethnic Chinese ancestry and were well regarded as community elders among the Yunnanese Chinese. In fact, Law became the unofficial head of the Yangon Yunnanese community from the 1990s and single-handedly settled historical disputes that no one else had the authority to touch. Over the last thirty years, the population of the Yunnanese Chinese in Yangon has increased, reaching a thousand households, as recorded recently by the association. This does not include many others who did not register themselves nor take active part in events organized by the association. As the populations of the Hokkien and, in particular, the Cantonese Chinese have continuously shrunk due to relocation to other countries in the same period, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Yunnanese Chinese are fast becoming the biggest ethnic Chinese group in Yangon with the largest population and perhaps the biggest wealth. The Yangon Yunnanese Association building, constructed in 2008 on newly purchased land in Thamine (in western Yangon, outside of the traditional Chinatown area), is certainly the most spacious among the buildings of the three ethnic Chinese regional groups in this city.

A WIDENED GAP BETWEEN THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH IN POST-INDEPENDENCE MYANMAR

A single image of the Burmese Chinese, overlooking regional differences and based primarily on Britain’s specific perception of the Chinese and its experiences in other Southeast and East Asian colonies and countries, started to take shape during the colonial era. This ethnic profile was accepted by both the colonial state’s mainstream society and, to some

extent, the ethnic Chinese themselves (regardless of their regional roots). However, in the post-war years, the process was reversed and an increasingly wide gap emerged between the ethnic Chinese in northern and southern Myanmar despite greater mobility and increased interactions.

I argue that this division can be attributed mostly to the different post-war experiences of the Yunnanese in the north and the Hokkien and Cantonese in the south, especially after the 1960s. The difference can be outlined in a statement I have heard many times from the local Chinese throughout Myanmar. It claims that “the Chinese in Lower Burma, especially the younger ones, can hardly speak the Chinese language properly nowadays, while the language standard in Upper Burma is much higher because they have had a good education.” Today, if one travels in Yangon, the Irrawaddy Delta and the coastal region from Rakhine to Tanintharyi, one can only communicate with local Chinese under 50 in Burmese, very broken English and, very rarely, their respective dialects. In contrast, Mandarin Chinese, with perhaps a slight Yunnanese accent, is fluently spoken by the ethnic Chinese and some other local residents of all ages in and north of Mandalay. For ethnic Chinese in this region, it is often the language comfortably spoken at home, most likely between grandparents and grandchildren. Underlying the language proficiency is the community’s collective cultural confidence and ethnic identity as a minority in present-day Myanmar.

This visible difference is a direct result of the availability of Chinese language education to the Chinese community in Myanmar, which varied greatly from place to place. After the mid-1960s, the ethnic Chinese in Lower Burma hardly had access to open and high-quality Chinese language education, but their counterparts in Upper Burma managed to maintain almost undisrupted Chinese language education under various, sometimes highly creative, forms. After the war, many local Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were viewed with suspicion by the newly established governments, especially at the height of the Cold War. In Myanmar, the 1962 coup marked the beginning of military rule that adopted the “Burmese Way to Socialism”. Private business enterprises, including Chinese-medium schools, Chinese-language newspapers and grassroots community associations were forced to close

down in the mid-1960s.¹³ Like in many other Southeast Asian Chinese communities, vernacular schools were seen as a pillar of the community not only to sustain the necessary language standard but also to foster a cultural connection to ancestral homes for younger generations. For the Yunnanese Chinese in Myanmar, whose social network might be less extensive than those of their Hokkien and Cantonese counterparts, schools teaching Chinese language play a decisive role in supporting the next generation with sufficient ethnic orientation, linguistically and culturally.

Between the 1960s and 2000s, the ethnic Chinese in northern Myanmar continuously looked for, and sometimes creatively invented, acceptable solutions to sustain this educational endeavour while remaining on the right side of the law. One notable and relatively successful case is the development of Kokang language 果文 schools in the Kokang district and the North Shan State. Today, Kokang is a self-administrated zone with a majority of ethnic Han residents near the Sino-Burmese border. It used to be a disputed territory between British Burma and Imperial China, and the current border was not demarcated until 1897. Since then, the local Han residents in Kokang have become the Kokang people 果敢族, one of the officially recognized ethnic groups in post-war Myanmar. Because of this official status, the language of the Kokang people (the Kokang language, that is, the Yunnanese dialect) could not be treated as a foreign language. This provides a strong policy and legal base for the existence of Kokang language schools, removing the impassable obstacles faced by many other ethnic Chinese in the country, whose ancestors came to Myanmar as immigrants and whose Myanmar citizenship was not categorized as native for a long time after independence.

In practice, the promotion of language education was largely facilitated by the long-term *de facto* head of the Kokang district, Law Sit Han. Despite his highly disputed, and sometimes notorious, experience

¹³ For information on the history of post-war Myanmar, see relevant chapters in, for instance, Robert Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Singapore: NUS Press: 2009) and Michael Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

as the leader of the Kokang militia force, the “godfather of heroin” in the infamous Golden Triangle and, in later years after the ceasefire, a business tycoon “retiring” in Yangon, Law is best remembered by the Yunnanese in Myanmar as a well-respected community leader who established and expanded Kokang (Chinese) language schools in northern Myanmar. These are the only schools of their type that openly teach the language at a highly competitive, near-first-language level. The Kokang Ethnic Cultural Association (*guogan minzu wenhua zonghui*), of which Law was the chairman, has been headquartered in Lashio since 1976. This subsequently made Lashio, a border town in North Shan State with a significant number of ethnic Kokang residents, a regional centre of Chinese language education.¹⁴ Since then, Kokang language schools, being part of the government education system, have provided a good level of Chinese language education to many children in this region, regardless of their ethnicities.

According to stories that have been well circulated among the local Yunnanese community, Law managed to do so by persuading the government that schools with ethnic features could pacify the people involved, thus helping to keep law and order in the highly unstable region in and around Kokang. The local authorities, not being totally ignorant of what was happening on the ground, tactically accommodated the situation. Whether this is true or not is another issue. The fact is, Law’s reputation remained good even after he lost essential control of Kokang. He was invited to be the honourable (and lifelong) chairman of many Yunnanese-related associations, located from Lashio to Yangon. Being a community elder with a formidable past, he often had a final say on difficult community issues. This special status certainly reflects

¹⁴ “miandian shanben lashu guogan minzu wenhua zonghui chengli sanshi zhounian qingdian dahui jishi” [The celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Kokang Ethnic Cultural Association in Lashio, North Shan State, Myanmar], date unknown, Guogantequwang [The Kokang Special Zone Network], <http://blog.boxun.com/hero/2007/ziyousanbang/1_1.shtml> (accessed 30 April 2015).

the community's recognition of his support for the language education, a highly treasured and widely applauded cultural contribution.

Of course, Law was not the only person in northern Myanmar to preserve language education for the Yunnanese community in creative and practical ways in an unfavourable environment. Others, for instance, established Buddhist study groups to teach the religious doctrine and the language in which the sutra is written simultaneously, thus opening up another possible way to circumvent the prohibition. Because the Myanmar government eagerly styled itself as a great patron of Buddhism, it would take considerably extra effort if one wanted to interfere with, or object to, religion-related activities like these. In every case, there was a huge amount of carefully calculated manipulation and management, a close reading of national policy and regional factions, and, most of all, well-cultivated personal relationships between project leaders, military commanders and civil servants in the region over a long period of time.

The distance between the power centre in Yangon and the north, the poor transportation system and constant ethnic conflicts in this region also favoured the Yunnanese communal effort on language education. The implementation of national prohibition was less strict in this region than it was in southern and central Myanmar, where the government has traditionally had tighter control, therefore leaving a little leeway to the community's advantage.

Different educational experiences lead to different orientations. For many years after independence, the Republic of China (ROC) was the major supplier of textbooks to schools in northern Myanmar. This helped to form a strong connection between the Chinese in northern Myanmar with Taiwan, despite the fact that most of them were originally from Yunnan and had no existing links to Taiwan. For generations of young Yunnanese students in northern Myanmar, the best, and perhaps only, chance to pursue further education was to excel in the ROC-organized examinations. These were once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, and the competition was extremely fierce. Once accepted by higher educational institutions in Taiwan and equipped with a ROC passport (in the earlier years), talented teenagers left their native towns to start new lives in Taiwan. Because of their previous education, they often integrated into

Taiwanese society without too much cultural and linguistic adaptation and later worked and married locally. Recent years have seen the return of this group, often in their 40s and 50s, to Myanmar, seeking new commercial opportunities. Others have remained in Taiwanese society, and a distinctive Myanmar-Taiwanese identity has emerged in the last few years.¹⁵

After the late 1980s, Beijing started to resume its cultural and economic connections with ethnic Chinese all over Myanmar, not unrelated to its strategic shift to the southwest. These activities have increased since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In 2008, the first Confucius Classroom in Myanmar was established in Mandalay, locally hosted by the Mandalay Hokkien Association/Temple.¹⁶ This certainly testifies to the long tradition and better maintenance of Chinese language education in the north. By then, several unofficial Chinese language schools, initiated in the northern hills and working with the Yunnanese, had been fully developed and well established in Mandalay, still the base of Yunnanese community. These schools often maintained their historical connections with Taiwan. This may explain why it was a group of non-Yunnanese Chinese, through a close relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s Consulate in Mandalay, that supported Beijing's language-education project. Two more Confucius Classrooms were established in Yangon in 2008 (in the same month as

¹⁵ The new image is best represented by the award-winning film director Midi Z 赵德胤, whose works often portray the frustration of the Myanmar Chinese diaspora. Z was born in Lashio in North Shan State, and was educated at a local Kokang language school before moving to Taiwan at the age of 16. For more details, see "Burmese-Chinese Director Midi Z on 'Ice Poison'", *Wall Street Journal*, 18 February 2014, <<http://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2014/02/18/burmese-director-midi-z-on-ice-poison/>> (accessed 30 April 2015).

¹⁶ "fuqing yuyan diannao xuexiao kongzi ketang" [The Fuqing Confucius Classroom], Confucius Institute Online, 28 August 2009 <http://www.chinese.cn/college/article/2009-08/28/content_20052.htm> (accessed 30 April 2015). Because the local host is not a government educational institute, it is not appropriate to grant the co-operation the status of "Institute"; therefore, it is given a lower status: "Classroom".

that established in Mandalay)¹⁷ and 2013.¹⁸ Both of them are based in the educational wings of the local (Hokkien) Chinese associations.¹⁹ Negotiations to establish the first Confucius Institute in Mandalay are underway.²⁰ However, the Confucius Institute (and its lesser version, the Confucius Classroom) is an institute aiming to teach Chinese as a foreign language in countries outside China, and indeed it has grown increasingly popular outside the ethnic Chinese community. However, the pedagogy it adopted has met with mixed feelings from some ethnic Chinese there, whose expectations of language education at the mother-tongue level remain high. With less than a decade of operation in Myanmar, the Confucius Institute has yet to make any significant impact on the regional disparity within the ethnic Chinese community.

The division initially introduced by language education over the last half-century remains. But it is obvious that, unlike the early post-war years, this division, mostly, is not of a political or ideological nature even though the two institutions involved inevitably exert their respective “soft powers”. However, with extensive exchanges with both PRC and ROC by Myanmar Chinese in all aspects, the division

¹⁷ “fuxing yuyan diannao xueyuan kongzi ketang” [The Fuxing Confucius Classroom], Confucius Institute Online, 28 August 2009 <http://www.chinese.cn/college/article/2009-08/28/content_20067.htm> (accessed 30 April 2015).

¹⁸ “Miandian disanjia kongzi ketang chengli” [The Third Confucius Classroom Is Established in Myanmar], Mianhuawang (Myanmar Chinese Network), 12 December 2013 <<http://www.mhwmm.com/Ch/NewsView.asp?ID=3170>> (accessed 30 April 2015).

¹⁹ Although Yangon is the traditional base for both Hokkien and Cantonese Chinese, the declination of the Cantonese population and their waning commercial and social influences over recent years mean that the Hokkien community is the main actor here.

²⁰ “Mianzhong liangsuo daxue qianyue gongtong shenban kongzi xueyuan, miandian shoujia kongzi xueyuan ni luohu mandele” [Two Universities in Myanmar and China Sign Referendum to Jointly Apply for the Establishment of the Confucius Institute, the First Confucius Institute in Myanmar May open in Mandalay], Jingfenghuang [The Golden Phoenix], 28 January 2015 <<http://www.mmgpmedia.com/local-news/9106-緬中兩所大學簽約共同申办孔子學院-緬甸首家孔子學院擬落戶曼德勒>> (accessed 30 April 2015).

hardly goes beyond cultural outlook. To some extent, the difference could be seen as a residue of colonial stereotypes and long-term mutual prejudices. However, ironically, if in colonial times the Yunnanese were laughed at for being the “country bumpkins” by sophisticated Cantonese and Hokkien with better multi-cultural experiences from the sea, the situation has reversed today. Nowadays, the Yunnanese are proud of their language skills, cultural achievements, audacity and perseverance and are bemused by the lower level of cultural and material confidence of their southern counterparts. For instance, these days, the Yunnanese in Yangon often see themselves as being more generous and less calculating than the “older” Hokkien and Cantonese residents in terms of donations and contributions to community welfare in particular and in carrying forward ethnic Chinese traditions in general.

REFLECTION ON THE YUNNANESE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN MYANMAR TODAY

A Victim's Discourse

Nonetheless, for the ethnic Chinese in post-war Myanmar, even the gap along the north–south line has not prevented a victim's discourse forming over the past half century. Nowadays, like in many other Southeast Asian Chinese communities, political identity is no longer an issue for the majority of them. More than seven decades after independence, and under an entirely new, post-Cold War global order, the struggle of the divided loyalty between ancestral and adopted lands could be safely left behind. Today, many ethnic Chinese, especially the younger ones, can obtain either pink ID cards (for native Myanmar citizens) or blue/green ID cards (for naturalized citizens) without as much difficulty as their parents or grandparents. Even though anguished memories of being foreigners with long and white passbooks, or Foreign Resident Cards (*waiqiaozheng*) and the anxieties of purchasing and carrying fake “native” Myanmar ID cards continue to haunt the elders, these concerns are no longer foregrounded in the community's daily life. Yet, almost all the Myanmar Chinese above a certain age continue to have feel strongly

that, like their multi-ethnic fellow countrymen in Myanmar, they have undergone a great deal of hardship over the course of Myanmar's post-colonial history.

However, there also exist subtle differences in the emphases of such victim's experiences. For the ethnic Chinese in the south, the mourning of the loss of a cultural tradition with distinctive ethnic features persists, despite the fact that Yangon has the most visible and relatively intact Chinese quarter in the country throughout these tumultuous decades. The climax of post-war hostility towards the Chinese in Myanmar was the 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Yangon, or the so-called 626 (June 26) Incident. Influenced by the escalated Cultural Revolution in China and encouraged by some Chinese embassy staff in Yangon, pro-PRC ethnic Chinese students insisted on wearing Maoist badges, which led to violent conflicts with the government in several high schools in Yangon. The conflict was further intensified in the days that followed, when the Chinese embassy was attacked, dozens of ethnic Chinese were killed in the Chinatown area, and many Chinese houses and shops were looted in and outside Yangon, allegedly by Burmese mobs.²¹ After the 626 Incident, the situation of the ethnic Chinese deteriorated rapidly as Chinese language and even Chinese costumes were deliberately avoided, particularly on Yangon streets. The community elders (those aged 60 and above), who were either born locally or arrived in Myanmar soon after WWII, are the group with the strongest resentment towards the "desinicization" process forced upon the Chinese community because they are the last group of people in Myanmar who received proper Chinese cultural and language education, either in Myanmar or in China.

If we look at the regional level, it is not difficult to identify similar cases in almost all other Southeast Asian Chinese communities in the same period. Under external (such as government policies) and internal (for instance the lack of financial resources and low interest from younger generations) pressures, almost every Chinese community in this

²¹ Fan Hongwei, "The 1967 Anti-Chinese Riots in Burma and Sino-Burmese Relations", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (June 2012): 234–56.

region went through a crisis of survival and had to learn to adopt new strategies. Some, such as the anti-Chinese attacks in Indonesia in the 1960s and the 1990s,²² were certainly much more violent and bloodier than the Myanmar case. Within Myanmar, the hostility against non-Burman ethnicities and the nationalization of private enterprises was not aimed solely at the Chinese. Indians, the other major immigrant group brought over by the colonial regime and whose population and commercial operations exceeded significantly those of their Chinese counterparts, faced similar post-war policies and suffered an even greater loss. However, the memory seems particularly fresh for the Chinese in Myanmar, and a reconciliation is not within reach. The long political isolation under the military regime was partly responsible for this mental stagnancy. The post-1988 Myanmar government did relax the strict prohibition on private enterprise, including privately owned newspapers and informal tuition centres. In response, the ethnic Chinese community seized the opportunity, with varying degrees of success. However, the unpredictable politics and constant change of top leadership continued to remind them, especially those who had witnessed the 1967 riots, of the precarious nature of their existence. For them, the trauma from 1967 and many years after that still forms the deepest scar in their collective memory.

Despite being less entangled in Yangon Chinatown politics and enjoying relatively fewer administrative controls, the Yunnanese Chinese in the north also saw the forced closure of grassroots associations and their affiliated private schools. However, the victim's discourse, which is as strong as that of their southern counterparts, lies somewhere else. For them, the harshest part of being ethnic Chinese in northern Myanmar, especially between the 1950s and 1980s, was fighting their way out of the hostile natural environment in the hills and surviving constant armed conflicts among various factions. In fact, many of them were part of the military forces themselves, either as local ethno-militia or as the remnant

²² For details, see Charles A Coppel, *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983) and Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia: 1996–99* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

KMT Army and its dependants and local recruits. The paramilitary nature of many Chinese war refugee stations scattered in the hills provided certain institutional facilities for dealing with everyday hardship in the early years.²³ Furthermore, the long history of negotiating difficult terrain and managing long-distance caravans in western Yunnan meant the Yunnanese Chinese would not have been surprised by the tough mountainous lifestyle in northern Myanmar. However, many Yunnanese elders today still recall the years in *Baiyi Shan* 摆夷山 (or the Baiyi Hills, the Chinese name for this mountainous border area)²⁴ with bitterness and tears, often talking about opening up wild lands against all odds, fighting and maintaining a subtle balance among rival forces.

Comparatively, the later years in lowland towns under direct Burmese control proved less difficult despite the unceasing poverty. When more and more Yunnanese Chinese moved down from the hills, they started to share a similar destiny as many others who lived under the military regime, including their fellow ethnic Chinese in the south. What was their impression then? Whenever this question was raised in different places in northern Myanmar, it was almost always met with the same answer, which claimed that the Burman were much more friendly and easier to deal with as compared to some other peoples in the hills. The Yunnanese often attributed this to the fact that the Burman were Buddhists, who were therefore reliable and charitable by nature in general. This implies a distinctive feature of the Burman as compared to other ethnic groups, as perceived by the Yunnanese Chinese based on their everyday experiences. Here, the bitter memory comes not from the “desinicization” process forced upon them by national policies but from the struggles related to having to survive hostile environments and peoples.

²³ Many were involved in the opium trade. For details, see Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Boulder: Westview Press; Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994).

²⁴ In northern Myanmar today, the word *baiyi* is generally used to refer to the Shan people. However, this is a very old name that has been widely used as a generic term for many ethnic groups in Yunnan since at least the fourteenth century.

Response to Recent Anti-Chinese/Anti-China Sentiments

A lot of the investigation for this article was conducted in March 2015, when anti-Chinese sentiment reached a symbolic climax in Myanmar. In December 2014, a clash between villagers and the police in the Letpadaung Copper Mine caused the death of a local woman, one of many casualties since the disputes over the mine started in 2012.²⁵ Protests by activists and students continued in Yangon over the following months. Anti-Chinese sentiment, which had started and grown silently under the military regime in the 1990s and 2000s, came to the surface after 2011. This was further triggered by large-scale Chinese state-backed projects such as the Myitsone Dam project in Kachin State (suspended in 2011)²⁶ and the oil-gas pipeline between the Rakhine coast and Yunnan (operations began officially in October 2013 for natural gas and in early 2015 for oil).²⁷ These highly controversial projects became the focus of anti-Chinese sentiment among the general Myanmar public and were often key battlegrounds for competing political forces within Myanmar.

Without extensive ethnographic fieldwork, it is difficult to identify the precise target of the current sentiment. Is it aimed at China, Myanmar's immediate neighbour and an emerging regional and global power, and its economic expansion and foreign policies? Or is it against the ethnic Chinese active in Myanmar? If so, which group of Chinese: long-term local residents or newly arrived investors and speculators? Although the ethnic Chinese have experienced economic, military and political upheavals in post-independent Myanmar to the same extent (if not more) as, the rest of Myanmar, the Sino-Burmese diplomatic relationship, except

²⁵ "Woman Fatally Shot at Myanmar Mine Protest", *New York Times*, 23 December 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2014/12/22/world/asia/ap-as-myanmar-mine-protest.html?_r=0> (accessed 30 April 2015).

²⁶ "Thousands to March for Termination of Burma's Myitsone Dam", *The Irrawaddy*, 21 March 2014 <<http://www.irrawaddy.org/environment/thousands-march-termination-burmas-myitsone-dam.html>> (accessed 30 April 2015).

²⁷ "Sino-Myanmar Crude Oil Pipeline Enters Trial Operation", *Xinhuanet*, 28 January 2015 <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-01/28/c_1133954062.htm> (accessed 30 April 2015).

for a few years after 1967,²⁸ has remained amicable for the majority of this period, at least on paper. This friendly situation is best epitomized by the term *pauk phaw* (“brother” or “fraternal” in Burmese), a rhetorical word to describe the “special relationship” between China and Myanmar due to their long history of interactions. The reality, of course, is more complicated than the euphoric *pauk phaw* term could possibly cover.²⁹ However, this highly symbolic term, well integrated for a long time into discourses in both countries, started to lose its currency after the 1990s among Myanmar intellectuals and the general public, when China became the biggest supporter of the junta and Chinese investment started entering the country.

For many in Myanmar, perhaps the precise target hardly matters. What they have seen in their daily lives are big projects and business enterprises initiated by China being implemented with little concern for the local environment and with few benefits to local communities, a situation that is often interpreted as concessions made by Myanmar top leaders in exchange for significant personal profits. These projects are carried out by the Chinese sent from China-based companies that are well connected with, if not directly under, national or provincial Chinese governments; and, until recently, have enjoyed privileges granted by the ruling junta. These newly arrived Chinese, who either work for the state-owned Chinese companies or themselves (or both), have little knowledge of the country. It is widely believed that these newcomers seek help from the local ethnic Chinese community, especially its leaders, through whom many commercial and personal conveniences may be secured, often bypassing restrictions on foreigners. This happens more often in the north than in the south because of the geographic proximity. With almost zero interaction with the average Myanmar person and little respect for local religious practices, these new Chinese investors’ daily existence in Myanmar is likely to be associated with extravagant lifestyles and abuse of local servants, contrast sharply with the lives of ordinary Myanmar

²⁸ Fan, “The 1967 anti-Chinese Riots”, pp. 239–40.

²⁹ Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar’s China Policy Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011).

people. The resentment from the Myanmar public,³⁰ essentially a deep-rooted resentment against the authoritarian government controlled by a small group of military elites and its close allies, finds a channel to express itself in the name of ethnic differences.

For many years, the ethnic Chinese have agonized over being treated as foreigners, a fact that has significantly contributed to the development of their victim's discourse; but now, they are suddenly sought after for being "Myanmar" and become agents and brokers for "real" foreigners, i.e., Chinese investors and speculators from China. In the eyes of the general public, however, the Chinese projects, capital and goods, and the Chinese people who work for, and assist them, are inseparable and need to be held jointly accountable. The post-war national discourse has been centred around one major ethnicity (the Bama) in a nation state, therefore the conception of nationality, ethnicity, and culture is often oversimplified, and the boundaries ill-defined for many living in Myanmar, including ethnic Chinese themselves. This is further complicated by the fact that many ethnic groups live on both sides of the Sino-Burmese border (such as the Shan/Dai, the Kachin/Jingpo, the Kokang/Han and the Wa) and could claim multiple belongings based on nationality, ethnicity, culture and language. It is hard to differentiate, or in some contexts, less relevant whether it is about Myanmar citizens of Han Chinese or China-related ethnicities, or Chinese citizens of the same ethnic stock. The big picture of China entering Myanmar, accompanied by its people, is sufficient to bring long-term resentment to the surface.

In January 2015, armed conflict resumed in Kachin State between the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) and the Myanmar Army. During the conflict, news about illegal Chinese cross-border timber workers being detained emerged,³¹ revealing extensive Chinese involvement in Kachin

³⁰ Fan also calls this resentment "a victim mentality" from the Myanmar intellectuals and public. Fan Hongwei, "Enmity in Myanmar against China," *ISEAS Perspective*, 8 (2014).

³¹ "Zhongguo zhumin lingguan gongbu gongzuozu tanshi beiguanya zhongguo gongmin zhaopian, zaiya renyuan jingshen shenti zhuangkuang lianghao" [The Chinese Embassy Publishes the Visit of the Embassy's Working Committee to

State. In February, the ethnic rebel force in Kokang joined the fight against the Myanmar Army, with fatal consequences on both sides of the border.³² The Chinese New Year Festival, in late February, happened to fall in the midst of the battle. To avoid an overtly Chinese display at this critical moment, the traditional celebrations, most notably the lion dance procession and firecrackers, were prohibited by the local government this year in Lashio, also the North Eastern Command of the Myanmar Army and the destination of many Kokang residents fleeing the conflict zone. Nonetheless, the town's ethnic Chinese residents, mostly of Yunnanese origin, still followed the festival tradition by sticking red couplets, where auspicious phrases were written in Chinese calligraphy, to the doors of their houses and shops. The battle between the ethnic Kokang and the Burmese soldiers once again raised national awareness of the ethnic Chinese as a whole in Myanmar, giving them a rather negative profile, at least in the eyes of the general public. Although the Kokang have enjoyed certain privileges (such as the right to ethnic language education) that distinguished them from other ethnic Chinese, at this critical moment, it was still ethnicity and culture, instead of nationality, that were singled out to associate them with their fellow ethnic folk in Myanmar (the Hokkien and Cantonese in the south, and other Yunnanese in the north) and in China in the current anti-Chinese/anti-China context.

Under these circumstances, I asked the ethnic Chinese in northern Myanmar for their opinions on the mounting hostile sentiment that they had witnessed in recent years. How did they feel about this new wave of anti-Chinese/anti-China sentiment in the country? To my surprise, many showed little concern about the current situation. This was in sharp contrast to the gloomy pictures presented by Myanmar, Western media and political analysts on the same issue. Almost all the interviewees cited

the Detained Chinese Citizens, Whose Physical and Mental Statuses Are in Good Condition], *Jingfenghuang* [The Golden Phoenix], 21 January 2015 <<http://www.mmgpmedia.com/local-news/9045-中国驻缅甸使领馆公布工作组探视被关押中国公民照片-在押人员精神身体状况良好>> (accessed 30 April 2015).

³² “China Protests over ‘Deadly Myanmar Border Raid’”, BBC, 14 March 2015 <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31885318>> (accessed 30 April 2015).

the existence of a strong, stable and rich China next door as the most important reason for their relaxed attitudes towards the recent upheaval. Many believed current anti-Chinese/anti-China sentiment was yet another episode of the global competition between the West and China and perceived the recent conflicts and protests as carefully calculated manipulations by regional and global actors. Such answers were far from convincing and were difficult to interpret. Had the interviewees developed over-willingly and ungrounded optimism towards their country of origin out of sentimental blindness? Or was it based on the hard facts of intensified Sino-Myanmar exchanges at all levels over the last few decades? No one among the interviewees had forgotten that “Beijing had no effective instrument to protect the Overseas Chinese in trouble”³³ during the anti-Chinese riots in the 1960s. However, they still felt a certain degree of psychological security from the very tangible presence of China within arm’s reach. A few Hokkien/Cantonese Chinese expressed a bit of anxiety and uneasiness, but, overall, the situation was not considered severe.

The disparity of opinions inside and outside the ethnic Chinese community is most obvious with regards to some strongly debated issues. For instance, Chinese property ownership in central Mandalay has been seen as an example of the “China problem” in Myanmar by local intellectuals and the public for years.³⁴ It not only caused local residents’ displacement to the suburbs but also threatened the very foundation of Burmese traditions. This is because central Mandalay with its many beautiful monasteries and the Royal Palace, even under British rule, was a centre for Burmese arts and crafts and Buddhist teachings and studies. It was also here that these traditional skills and religious values were promoted and supported by pre-colonial Burmese kings. The loss of the physical core of past glories to foreign ownership and the ubiquitously unattractive Chinese buildings is viewed as the foremost indicator of

³³ Fan, “The 1967 anti-Chinese Riots”, p. 253.

³⁴ Mya Than, “The Ethnic Chinese in Myanmar and Their Identity”, in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, edited by Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1997), pp. 115–46.

anti-Chinese/anti-China sentiment, being widely regarded as a symbol of “foreign” invasion “from the east” into the cultural and religious root of Myanmar. However, ethnic Chinese who were long-term residents in Myanmar were of a completely different opinion, claiming that the land purchases in question (and the commercial transactions in general) were conducted in an entirely lawful manner in an open market as permitted at that time under the then government (no matter how unpopular it was), with well-recognized practices and acceptable prices, thus being foolproof against contestation.

It is beyond this article to make an adequate judgement regarding this issue in Myanmar. The point as shown here, however, is the astonishingly huge gap in the perception between the different parties involved. These contested and conflicting opinions may well indicate insufficient communication and mutual understanding and the lack of objective and panoramic analysis at the grassroots and communal levels.

CONCLUSION

This is a preliminary study of the past and present situations of the ethnic Chinese community in Myanmar, with a focus on the Yunnanese and with reference to the Hokkien and Cantonese. Due to the lack of sufficient secondary literature and the long-term inaccessibility to the subject group, the topic remains a challenge to scholars from outside the country.³⁵ The information and arguments presented here thus cover the issue with a very limited scope, providing partial, if not biased, views from the ground, as the majority of the interviewees were community elders. As scholars working in Myanmar acknowledge,³⁶ long-term

³⁵ One exception is the excellent work by Chang, which tells personal and family stories among the Yunnanese in northern Myanmar and their connections with Taiwan. Wen-Chin Chang, *Beyond Borders: Stories of Yunnanese Chinese Migrants of Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

³⁶ Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang, ed., *Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories Under the Burmese Regime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 17.

political oppression has led to a silent culture that drives people to avoid anything remotely sensitive or that might bring unforeseeable hazards to individuals and families. Despite my best efforts, the interviews conducted and the opinions collected may not best reflect what the subject group really thinks, instead demonstrating what they want others to believe they think. Furthermore, as an ethnic Chinese person originating from mainland China, I understand the limitations of my access to historically pro-ROC individuals in gathering personal experiences and candid opinions.

Despite all these constraints, this preliminary survey finds that two distinctive features prevail in the Myanmar Chinese community today: the community is heavily influenced by, and over-consciously connected to, its post-war history; and the disparity of information and opinions inside and outside the community is extraordinarily huge. The close connection to its recent past certainly is a result of Myanmar's long isolation and strong and consistent nationalist outlook. It prevents the community as a whole from moving on to a highly globalized, multipolar world in the twenty-first century, a very different situation from what it used to be at the height of the Cold War conflict, the last point at which Myanmar society had normal and regular contact with the rest of the world. The recent political, social and economic reforms and the sudden availability of foreign products and ideas might significantly shorten the material and perceptive distance and bring the community (known for its conservative outlook) up to date in perceptions and practices, preventing it from dwelling too much on the past. However, this cannot be completed overnight nor without confusion and resistance. Similar processes were seen in many other Southeast Asian Chinese communities decades ago, and Myanmar will unlikely be an exception.

The disparity between Chinese and non-Chinese opinions on critical issues related to China, Chinese investments and Chinese people presents a delicate situation that may increase mutual distrust along ethnic lines, and further complicate the many ethnic tensions in Myanmar. As discussed above, the precise nature and specific target of recent anti-Chinese/anti-China sentiment are hard to define; nonetheless, these sentiments clearly show general disappointment with the current domestic situation that began during the junta years, and may also

indicate the level of failure of post-2011 political and economic reforms. This, however, is not fully acknowledged, and little shared, by the ethnic Chinese community in question. Underlying this gap in perspective is the lack of communication and exchange from both sides and, most of all, the lack of motivation to engage in these. Since 2011, we have witnessed conflicts in Myanmar based on religious and ethnic differences, most notably those against the Rohingya and other Muslim communities. The upcoming general election later this year and the subsequent new government mean that if the current lack of inter-community exchange continues, it is not unlikely that ethnic Chinese might be the next target for political factions searching to exploit existing resentment in order to temporarily placate the general dissatisfaction. As for the resentment against China in general, which involves stakeholders and issues far beyond ethnic relations and the Chinese community in Myanmar, the situation is too complicated and information too insufficient for this short article to make a convincing assessment.

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