

REFERENCE

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Beyond Borders: Stories of Yunnanese Chinese Migrants of Burma. By Wen-Chin Chang. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. 296 pp.

Studies of borderlands have, in recent decades, de-centred our understanding of a world dominated by nation-states. They highlight the flows of people, capital, commodities, information and ideas in spaces that may be off the beaten path, but not necessarily peripheral to the political and economic life of countries. Through oral history accounts and ethnographic snippets collected over the course of more than a decade, from the 1990s to the late 2000s, *Beyond Borders* presents Yunnanese Chinese as mobile subjects that are integral to the economic dynamism of a Burma or Myanmar that has been isolated for decades. It offers a rare glimpse into the border regions of Yunnan, Burma and Thailand, where smuggling and political insurgency have been part of everyday life for decades, and it traces the lives of Yunnanese subjects that stretch from these border regions to Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Taiwan.

The book is divided into two parts, dealing with migratory history and transnational trade respectively. By applying a personal narrative approach, the author seeks to outline the contours of these themes through the life stories of key informants. One of them is Zhang Dage (Chapter 1), who was born in the restive Shan State of Burma into the family of a Kuomintang (KMT) soldier who had retreated from Communist China. Zhang Dage completed his junior high school education in Northern Thailand, went to medical college and became a physician in Taiwan, where he settled down and had a family. This

passage across national borders was also a quest for social mobility, a motivation that lies behind many of the peripatetic exploits of the subjects treated in the book. Yet these multiple displacements also evoke a sense of rootlessness, and in Zhang Dage's recollections and writings we find the tumultuous past wrapped up in nostalgia, emplacing diasporic subjects in their memories.

Through such recollections, the author not only weaves together the social history of migrant lives across borderlands, but also begins to get to the heart of why people move. In the cases of Mr Li and his son (Chapter 3), whose Yunnanese male subjectivity is cultivated through "exploring the world and enhancing social connections" (p. 112), moving is related to the pursuit of ambition. The senior Li had been an influential figure in the KMT military who had to move his family many times and later ventured into ruby mining, while the junior Li left home at age nineteen to work in Thailand, then Taiwan, before eventually returning to Burma with his family. This penchant for exploring the world is valorized culturally through the Chinese word *chuang*, embedding such outward movements in discourses of male heroism and subject formation that are common in many other cultures.

However, not all men succeed in their pursuit of ambition; many are lost to gambling, drugs and the various dangers of the border regions. This leaves the women to shoulder the burdens of the family, and the author, as a female anthropologist, is uniquely poised to unveil the lives of female migrants and traders. The story of Ae Maew (Chapter 2), who strived to go to university in Burma and then Taiwan, and managed to purchase a home for her family and supported them with her earnings, matches the tempo of social mobility that Zhang Dage's narrative evinces. But in this case, her "success" is marred by the "failures" of her brothers, and tears accompany the regrets and squabbles in which the family is mired. Thus, the script of women's economic pursuits is structured by familial concerns. In the case of women traders, economic exploits do not lead to individual autonomy, but are a means for them to fulfil their obligations as daughters, wives and mothers, and to maintain the stability of their families and family members' well-being. This

is apparent in the narrative of Qiu Dajie (Chapter 6), who had to engage in the risky ruby trading and moneylending businesses in order to support her family because her husband had become a drug addict and was jailed.

Readers interested in the clandestine trade of the border regions will find Chapters 5 and 7 particularly interesting. Chapter 5 reconstructs the caravan trade between Yunnan, Burma and Thailand. Besides an exposition of the cultural practices of the caravan trade, the account also demonstrates the complicity among the state, warring factions and traders in making such smuggling activities possible. Chapter 7 details the rise of the Duans and the Pengs in the jade trade, and how the “circulatory regime” of traded commodities, capital, people, information and knowledge extends beyond the border regions to Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Here, we see what Aihwa Ong (1999) calls “flexible citizenship” in action, as these families use their various citizenships to facilitate the mining, purchase, export, sales and trading of jade in different countries.

This book is an attempt at capturing the fluidity of a border region that has held an aura of mystery for Southeast Asianists for a long time. What the author has to offer is not history with a capital “H” or ethnography with a capital “E”, but the narratives of mobile subjects and her reading of these narratives. The wide range of stories collected in different field sites — from KMT soldiers and their families, itinerant traders and even Yunnanese Muslims — gives us a sense of the different lives that can be lived in this border region. In fact, the intimacy of the narratives invites us to meet and gives us the desire to meet the author’s interlocutors, to have the chance to pose some questions of our own. Hopefully, this book will inspire other empirically grounded studies of diasporic subjects.

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