

Book Reviews

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Chinese in Colonial Burma: A Migrant Community in a Multiethnic State. By Yi Li. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xviii+262 pp.

Publications on ethnic Chinese in Burma or Myanmar have remained relatively scarce in comparison to the plethora of works on the same subject for other Southeast Asian countries, especially Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. *Chinese in Colonial Burma* is a valuable new publication which examines the lives of Burmese Chinese in a range of towns and cities from 1826 to 1942, a time of British rule prior to the Japanese occupation. A historian, Li makes use of a wide range of historical sources — colonial archives, media reports and travelogues, records of Chinese organizations in Burma, and materials on Sino-Burmese relations. In addition, the book references a wealth of information on colonial studies, Burmese history and Chinese diasporas. It is innovative in its breadth of coverage — dealing with both maritime Chinese (Fujianese or Hokkien, and Cantonese) and mountain or overland Chinese (Yunnanese) — and for raising several bold arguments that invite further research from other scholars for affirmation or challenge. Moreover, while providing structural contexts based on historical materials, Li skilfully integrates current ethnographic facts into her arguments to render a nuanced contrast between the present and the past.

With respect to the theoretical framework, Li draws on Adam McKeown's work (McKeown 1999 and 2001) to situate Chinese diasporas beyond nation-states' boundaries, and leads us to see how closely the lives of Burmese Chinese were interwoven with their homeland, the British imperial world and Southeast Asian Chinese

networks. Consequently, she presents their development in light of national, regional and global histories. While highlighting the transnational connectivity among Chinese (migrant) communities in Burma, the Malay world, Thailand and China, Li extends comparisons between Burmese Chinese and Burmese Indians, especially regarding their economic and political pursuits in relation to colonial rule. Although the author concentrates on the history of the elite class, and some arguments still require more evidence, the book provides a significant beginning to the study of ethnic Chinese history during the colonial period in Burma.

Chapter 1 presents the outline of the book, which is organized into two sections. Part 1 looks into the migration history and process of community building of mountain Chinese (chapter 2) and maritime Chinese (chapter 3). Part 2 discusses three major aspects that defined the Burmese Chinese as a migrant community in Burma — their economic and political engagements, and crimes (chapters 4, 5 and 6). These chapters explore how stereotyped images linked to these aspects were presented by the colonial government as well as by Burmese Chinese themselves. Consciously and modestly, Li acknowledges the limits of the book, in light of her inability to thoroughly examine English and Chinese archives, the loss of a great number of historical sources in the course of the Second World War and the anti-Chinese movements in the 1960s, and her scant use of Burmese materials.

Chapter 2 takes Yunnanese migrants as the start of the book's focus. This is a sensible approach, as Burma adjoins Yunnan, and bilateral interactions have been intense throughout history, especially via human migration. With regard to Yunnanese immigrants in Burma, the author limits this discussion to those who came from Tengyueh and settled in Bhamo and Mandalay. Bhamo was a significant frontier town, and Mandalay was the last capital of the former Burmese kingdom. By portraying Yunnanese lives in these two places, Li displays the complex border history characterizing multiple powers, and Yunnanese migrants navigating between the politics of imperial China and that of imperial Britain. Li argues that the British expansion into northern Burma and subsequent

civil establishment, economic development and border demarcation brought about the removal of the ambiguous identity that Chinese people — whether indigenes or migrants — had formerly retained. While endeavouring to establish their community by founding a series of organizations — native-place associations, temples and schools — these migrants continued to orient their loyalty towards their home country. Moreover, those who moved to Rangoon for economic opportunities associated themselves with maritime Chinese to form a Burmese Chinese community. In other words, under British rule, Yunnanese migrants not only cohered as a group vis-à-vis indigenous people of multiple ethnicities, but they also merged with the Fujianese and Cantonese. According to the author, apart from factors attributed to the colonial regime, the politics of their homeland — transitioning from an imperial to a republican state — played a fundamental role in this development.

While these arguments are inspiring, the cited evidence from archival materials appears insufficient. First, the examples referred to are limited to the elite class; the large number of Yunnanese labourers, petty traders and farmers are not taken into consideration. Were these people as concerned about China's politics as the gentry merchants quoted in the book? Moreover, were there Yunnanese merchants who actually collaborated with the colonial government? Second, although administrative practices exert influence over one's identity, human pragmatism often surpasses regulations. While conducting fieldwork among Yunnanese Chinese migrants in rural and urban areas of Myanmar, I noticed that many of them had registered themselves as indigenous minorities. This was their way of coping with the strict Burmese citizenship law. Likewise, Yunnanese migrants under the colonial regime may have had their own ways of dealing with administrative demands. The ambiguity of identity prior to British expansion into Burma may not have disappeared immediately. Third, the impact of colonial rule did not penetrate remote lands as deeply as urban areas. Numerous Yunnanese itinerant traders and miners who relocated to rural Shan and Kachin States would not have had to face colonial administration in daily life to the same extent as

their urban counterparts. Although Tengyueh migrants in Bhamo and Mandalay were conspicuous groups for research, they might not actually represent the diverse Yunnanese lives in other parts of the country.

In contrast to the Yunnanese migrants in Bhamo and Mandalay discussed in the previous chapter, chapter 3 investigates stories of maritime Chinese and covers a much wider range of places where Fujianese and Cantonese settled — Pyapon, Moulmein, Bassein, Mergui and Rangoon. This chapter, like chapter 2, introduces various community organizations — the history of their founding and subsequent development. These organizations provided moral support as well as practical assistance to their members, including temporary accommodation, job opportunities and financial aid. Almost every Chinese male joined a secret society, as these societies granted “a guarantee for the security of one’s personal life and the safe operation of one’s business” (p. 90). Li examines the mutual interactions among these organizations, and traces the connections between some of them and Chinese temples and secret societies in Penang. Another focus of chapter 3 is the array of ceremonies conducted among the Fujianese and Cantonese, including weddings, funerals and temple celebrations, which Li calls everyday practices. As these ceremonies were held on particular occasions, this term may not really suit. These ceremonies constituted a significant dimension of these migrants’ lifeworld and their ethnic and community identity. The section on grand weddings and funerals offers an interesting window into the luxurious lifestyle of an upper-class family — that of the famed Rangoon tycoon Lim Chin Tsong.

Chapter 4 discusses how the colonial government presented Burmese Chinese as an economically active group. Li scrutinizes two major colonial publications, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Burma: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (Wright 1910) and *Who’s Who in Burma* (*Who’s Who in Burma* 1926), that recorded a range of economic fields in which ethnic Chinese engaged — large-scale rice farming, rubber plantations, mining and construction. These two sources treated prominent

Chinese merchants' affluent lifestyles and pastimes, both Chinese and Western. Their industriousness was promoted positively in the media.

In contrast, reports on Indian merchants often presented negative images of them — for example, presenting the Chettiars as greedy moneylenders. Why was there such a difference? Li points out that the Indian population in Burma was several times larger than the Chinese. The former constituted the main workforce, similar to the large number of Chinese migrants in the Dutch East Indies, whom the colonial regime perceived as a substantial threat. Likewise, the British considered the Indian a potential danger and deemed the Chinese benign. The popular image of Burmese Chinese as a wealthy group, however, only rendered a partial reality. Li points out the existence of numerous Chinese labourers, small farmers and miners. Working with meagre resource materials, as Li claims, she presents no further details about their living conditions or lifestyles. Despite the coexistence of rich and poor, Chinese migrants have tended to emphasize the former category and leave out the latter. Li thus concludes that the stereotyped image of prosperous Burmese Chinese has been internalized by members of the community.

Chapter 5 makes a shift in emphasis to probe the dark side of migrant Chinese in public media and official documents — their vices. The frequently reported crimes included involvement in opium, gambling, illicit alcohol production and intergroup violence among secret societies. Li argues that the coverage of ethno-crimes was a deliberately designed strategy applied by the British colonial regime to reinforce its own governance and legitimacy. The targeted groups included both the indigenous and migrant communities. However, was it a contradiction to portray the Chinese as a commercially successful group and as a community engaged in crime at the same time? Li explains, "Imperial commercial interests needed a successful Eastern race to stimulate and testify to the economic success of colonization, while the administrative forces with concerns over the colony's internal order required negative categorization of its Asian subjects" (p. 169). Furthermore, she asserts that Chinese vices in Burma were not perceived by the colonial power as uncontrollable.

These are intriguing arguments that invite further research into the actual crimes committed by the Chinese, their connections with the colonial power, and an evaluation of whether there was a gap between actual and recorded crimes.

Chapter 6 explores political engagements among Burmese Chinese, especially their participation in the home country's political affairs during the transition from imperial to republican China. Li highlights a series of political organizations and movements in Rangoon and beyond, and depicts prominent figures who joined them. Crucial events included the arrival of the reformer Kang Youwei in Rangoon (1905) and the founding of a Tongmenghui branch by the revolutionaries (1908) and of the Chinese Chambers of Commerce by the Qing court (1909), both also in Rangoon. Republican China was founded in 1911, and the repercussions continued to affect diasporic communities. Although she acknowledges the rivalry that opposing political groups in China generated among ethnic Chinese in immigrant societies, Li emphasizes the cohering effects on the community attributed to political changes in China. In particular, the movement against the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s galvanized pan-Chinese patriotism. The regional division among Fujianese, Cantonese and Yunnanese was dissolved as a result.

Not only were Burmese Chinese concerned with their home country's politics, but they were also active in the politics of the host society. Some even took positions in the British colonial government, including that of minister. Moreover, ethnic Chinese were involved in Burma's independence movement. The British administration paid little attention to the political activities that took place among Burmese Chinese, as it did not consider this small migrant group dangerous. Burmese nationalists, however, were xenophobic towards ethnic Chinese participation in Burma's politics. To conclude the chapter, Li asserts that Burmese Chinese were "one of the most politically active people in Burma at that time" (p. 210). However, as only the activities of elite Chinese are presented, future study on political life among the lower classes would help to build a more complete picture.

This is the first historical book on Burmese Chinese in English, and Li has scrutinized the colonial archives and other historical materials extensively. She has presented a structural history that covers a range of significant issues, and has raised several provocative arguments. The most controversial of these may be her underlying thesis that the reconfiguration of Burmese Chinese society in light of colonial rule and political changes in China resulted in the creation of a singular community sharing one ethnic identity. Li's view is different from that of Jayde Lin Roberts, who claims that native-place loyalty and sub-group divisions surpassed pan-Chinese nationalism (Roberts 2016, pp. 51, 52, 76).

In the epilogue, Li contests J.S. Furnivall's contention that Burma was a plural society constituted by a medley of peoples who only met in the marketplace and had no further interaction in other aspects of daily life. She states that people of multiple ethnicities interacted in different aspects of daily life that caused them to reshape their identity. However, the evidence contained in the book may not be sufficient to support this contention, as there is still a wide gap between securing contrary examples and coming to a generalized statement. Burma is a diverse society; one may find that the extent of inter-ethnic interactions differs in different places.

Despite the queries and critiques raised above, Li's book is a very valuable one. Throughout the book she has successfully kept a transnational vision by interweaving the histories of political change in China, the expansion of the British imperial world and the evolution of the Burmese Chinese community. Furthermore, she highlights the connections between Burmese Chinese and other ethnic Chinese groups in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. In short, the book has provided an inspiring basis for looking at the lives of Burmese Chinese during the British colonial period, and for continuing endeavours to explore other related archives and relevant materials.

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Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature. By Brian C. Bernards. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015 and Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. xiii+288 pp.

This is a nuanced and wide-ranging study of the literary representation of the South Seas throughout the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. Combining literary analysis and cultural history, *Writing the South Seas* conceptualizes “the Nanyang” (p. 3) as a trope that pulls together a vast range of different forms of expression. Nanyang, the South Seas, denotes an area in Southeast Asia that is also “an archipelagic trope” (p. 13), yet Bernards goes much further than simply using the geographical boundaries of the archipelago as a framework for comparative literary studies. Instead, the Nanyang is at once a “postcolonial literary trope of Chinese travel, migration, settlement, and creolization in Southeast Asia” (p. 3) and “a literary trope [that] moves between different national literary contexts” (p. 9). Most importantly, as a literary trope it “crosses colonial, national, and linguistic borders” (p. 8), while denoting “symbiotic,