Note on Fieldwork, Names, Transliteration, and Currency

My research subjects include primarily Yunnanese Chinese migrants (hereafter Yunnanese migrants) who are residing in Burma (or Myanmar) and secondarily those who have moved from Burma to another country, especially Thailand. The population is composed of both Han Chinese and Muslims. On account of their continuous mobility (in terms of both internal and external migrations), I often use “migrant Yunnanese” in this book. Sometimes I also specify “Yunnanese in Burma,” “Yunnanese in Thailand,” and so on, depending on the context. Throughout history the Yunnanese have basically undertaken migration from Yunnan in southwestern China to upland Southeast Asia by land; the Yunnanese migrants in the region are thus also referred to as “overland Yunnanese” (Chang 2006; Forbes 1987, 1–2; Hill 1983; Sun 2000, 10). The term is in contrast to “overseas/maritime Chinese.” The latter are derived from the coastal provinces of southeastern China, primarily the Hokkien/Fujianese, the Cantonese, and the Hakka, who set off for host countries by sea.

I started my anthropological research among the Yunnanese migrants in northern Thailand in late 1994. According to the Yunnanese Association
in Chiang Mai, the estimates of the total population of Yunnanese migrants
in Thailand are between 100,000 and 150,000. Most of them are located
along the borders of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Mae Hongson Provinces. Many in the younger generation have relocated to Chiang Mai and
Bangkok. In 2000, I extended my fieldwork to Burma (now Myanmar),
where a much larger Yunnanese population resides. No accurate popu-
lation figure is available there, either, but estimates given by informants
range from half a million to one million.1 These estimates also include
the Kokang Yunnanese, largely residing in Shan State. My field sites in
Burma cover major cities, towns, and villages where Yunnanese migrants
are concentrated, primarily in upper Burma. Because of practical con-
straints, I have however not been able to travel as widely as I wished for
field research in the country. Apart from Thailand and Burma, I have also
conducted research among Yunnanese who have migrated to Taiwan from
Thailand and Burma and returnees to China (many of them investors in
Yunnan, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong). The primary field data in this
book are collected up to 2010, but later developments in Burma have also
been integrated.2 For data collecting I sometimes took notes, while at other
times I used a tape recorder or, in later days, an MP3 recorder, depending
on the situation.

Yunnanese in Burma and Thailand normally address each other with
affiliated terms based on the kinship principle. Terms such as “Mr.” and
“Mrs.” are used formally for people with some social status. Learning to
address people correctly was the first step in my fieldwork. In this book, I
refer to the narrators in the way I addressed them in the field. However,
out of respect to teachers in Chinese society, most of my informants address
me as “Teacher Chang.”

All the informants’ names given in this book are pseudonyms. Some-
times I have had to change the narrators’ residential locations or profes-
sions in order to disguise their identification. Interview dates are indicated
only when they will not compromise the interviewees’ safety. I use the pin-
yin Romanization for transliteration of Chinese characters.

1. The estimate of the total population of the ethnic Chinese in Burma (including both
overland Yunnanese and maritime Chinese) given by the CIA is about 1.65 million, accounting
for 3 percent of the whole nation’s population; see https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-
world-factbook/geos/bm.html (last access date October 2, 2013).

2. The accumulated time on fieldwork from 1994 to 2010 is thirty-six months.
There are no standard transliterations for names of places in Burma. Some places changed names after 1988. I use new names in this book but add old names in brackets when they appear the first time. Some places share the same name, or the same place has different names. For example, “Panglong” is the name for the famous Shan town where the “Panglong Agreement” was signed in 1947. It is also the name for an important place that Yunnanese Muslims resettled after fleeing from Yunnan in the wake of the Muslim Rebellion (1856–1873 CE). As the first “Panglong” is also called “Pinlong,” I use the latter name in order to distinguish it from the Yunnanese Muslims’ “Panglong.”

Kyat is Burmese currency. Its exchange rate with US dollars is 780 kyat to one dollar in June 2011. (It was around 1,000 kyat to one dollar two years earlier.) Baht is Thai currency. Its exchange rate with US dollars is 30.4 baht to one dollar in June 2011. NT (new Taiwan dollar) is the Taiwanese currency. Its exchange rate with US dollars is 28.7 NT to one dollar in June 2011. RMB (renminbi) is Chinese currency. Its exchange rate with US dollars is 6.39 RMB to one dollar in August 2011.
Map 1. Shan State of Burma and northern Thailand
Map 2. Major underground trading routes between Burma and Thailand
Map 3. Map of Shan State, Yunnan, Guangdong, Fujian, Hong Kong, and Taiwan
Beyond Borders