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Harris, Tina, van Schendel, Willem, Zhang, J., Saxer, Martin

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8 ‘China is Paradise’

Fortune and Refuge, Brokers and Partners, or the Migration Trajectories of Burmese Muslims toward the Yunnan Borderlands

Renaud Egreteau*

Introduction: The Road from Mandalay

Syed Islam, a young Muslim in his mid-twenties, likes to boast about his epic journey from Myanmar (formerly Burma) to Ruili, a bustling Chinese market town located in southern Yunnan, right at the Burmese border. Born and raised in Myanmar’s western Rakhine (formerly Arakan) State, he left his hometown a couple of years ago, and illegally crossed into Bangladesh. There, he bought a flight ticket and flew from Dhaka to Bangkok. Once in Thailand, local friends helped him travel by bus to Mae Sot, on the Thai-Myanmar border, where he sneaked back into Myanmar, and made it to Yangon. From the former Burmese capital, which he could not directly reach from his native Rakhine State because of government travel restrictions, he made the journey northwards to the cities of Mandalay and Lashio, and then entered Yunnan a few days later.

Syed Islam is not alone in making this arduous journey from western Myanmar to China. Wandering in the streets of Ruili (or Shweli in Burmese), one cannot overlook the presence of South Asian-looking shopkeepers and the local success of Bollywood movies. The bearded and dark-skinned men wearing longyis (Burmese sarong) and topis (Muslim prayer cap), chewing

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1 In this chapter, all names of informants have been changed to protect their anonymity. In Myanmar, ‘U’ is a designation of respect for elder men, and ‘Daw’ for women.

2 For linguistic simplicity and without any political connotation, this chapter uses the English adjectives ‘Burmese’ and ‘Burman’. ‘Burmese’ refers to the citizenship and common language of the people of present-day Myanmar, while ‘Burman’ more specifically designates the ethnic Bamar majority of the country, where non-Burman ethnic minorities, such as the Karens, Kachins, Mons, Rohingyas, and so on, also dwell. Myanmar is the country’s official post-1989 appellation, and admitted as such henceforth. Yangon is the vernacular term for the English Rangoon. The Rakhine State was known as the Arakan State until 1989.
betel nut and smoking cheroots (Burmese cigars), belong to Muslim communities that have immigrated from Myanmar over the past two decades. Almost exclusively Sunni, and distinct from the local Chinese Muslim communities (the ‘Hui’ 回, also colloquially known as ‘Panthay’ in the Burmese language), these ‘Burmese Muslims’ have since the late 1980s established extensive networks of trade and set up successful gem and jade businesses, grocery stores, restaurants and cosmetic shops in a few major cities of Southwestern Yunnan. This chapter explores their remarkable history of migration in the context of a booming borderworld. It draws on fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2012 in Ruili, Jiegao, and Baoshan – three bustling Chinese commercial towns located along the historical ‘Burma Road’ that has connected, since it was built in the late 1930s, the Burmese city of Mandalay and Kunming, Yunnan’s capital. It seeks to understand why and how Burmese Muslims have been venturing northwards, while the dominant trend of migration rather points southwards, from Yunnan into resource-rich Myanmar.

From the mid-1980s indeed, the geopolitical configuration of Myanmar’s northern areas has significantly changed. For decades, several armed groups had acted as powerful buffers between Myanmar and its northern Chinese neighbour. Since the 1960s, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA, formed in 1961) and other ethnic armed militias controlled most of the trafficking routes, resources and movements of people in the Sino-Burmese borderlands (Lintner 1999). However, when in the 1980s Beijing decided to withdraw its moral and financial support to Burmese communist insurgents, these buffer territories began to vanish. Under Deng Xiaoping’s guidance, China was entering a new era. Maintaining stability in the region and opening a door to booming Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, became a key element of Deng’s approach. This shift in Chinese policy coincided with the regime change in Yangon in 1988 and the advent of a supposedly more liberal military junta ready to end the country’s isolation. Amidst the Burmese pro-democracy uprising of August 1988, a border trade agreement was signed between China and the Burmese authorities; bilateral commerce subsequently flourished (Lintner 1989, 1994). Yunnanese merchants, investors, and fortune-seekers began to flood into northern Myanmar and Mandalay, the long-standing centre of the Burmese gem and jade business.

An extensive and growing literature has focused on the massive flows of Chinese immigration into Myanmar, along the ‘Road to Mandalay’, as Kipling’s poem goes. Whilst he never set foot in the former Burmese royal capital, Rudyard Kipling wrote in 1890 an acclaimed poem entitled ‘Mandalay’. It narrates how a British soldier stationed in colonial

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3 Whilst he never set foot in the former Burmese royal capital, Rudyard Kipling wrote in 1890 an acclaimed poem entitled ‘Mandalay’. It narrates how a British soldier stationed in colonial
Burma longs for a young Burmese girl. After 1885 and the annexation of Upper Burma, British troops were continuously taken up on the Irrawaddy River from Rangoon to Mandalay, or the slow and never-ending 'Road to Mandalay'.
increasing economic dominance of Yunnanese migrants in Myanmar since the early 1990s, and the resentment this has generated among Burmese local populations (Mya Maung 1994, Seekins 1997, Le Bail and Tournier 2010, Zin 2012). However, little has been written about migratory flows in the opposite direction: from Myanmar into China, on the ‘Road from Mandalay’.

Based on ethnographic research on both Burmese migrants who arrived recently in Yunnan and well-settled Burmese shopkeepers, this study argues that two main driving forces have pushed and pulled them, respectively, toward China. The first is economic: the search for better job opportunities and the prospect of a thriving business environment have attracted many Burmese to a booming Yunnan province since the late 1980s. Myanmar’s gem and jade industry, with which Burmese and Chinese Muslim communities have a long history of association, is most notable in this respect. Surging demand from Chinese consumers in the 1990s fostered a new type of Burmese economic migration northwards and the Burmese Muslims are ideally positioned to use and expand their diasporic networks as well as their brokerage skills across the Chinese borders. In the process, the Chinese borderlands have been transformed into a wider transnational space, interconnected with the rest of the world, and in which Burmese Muslim ‘middlemen’, as neighbours and brokers, feel very much at ease.

The second driving force is the search for refuge. Muslim communities have long been the target of patronizing and discriminating treatment in Myanmar – by the postcolonial state authorities, the police, as well as local Buddhist populations. Persecution has been especially rampant in the Rakhine State and in central Myanmar. Scores of Burmese Muslims have therefore looked for safer places to practice their religion and negotiate their own Islamic identity. Intriguingly, China, and Yunnan in particular, offered a far more benign environment than Myanmar. There, across the borders, Burmese Muslim migrants have found a much sought-after sanctuary. In this process of seeking fortune and religious refuge, this chapter will then show, the Burmese Muslim migrants have engaged in active and positive ‘neighbouring’ in the borderworld along the southern edges of Yunnan. This borderworld offers them a site where they can safely prosper. In the local Chinese business world they are ‘useful neighbours’, or in Chirot and Reid’s (1997) words, ‘essential outsiders’.

In this chapter, I will first briefly outline the historical origin, role and middlemen position of the various Muslim communities inhabiting Myanmar. I will then trace their migration to China arguing that they moved northwards in search of both a safe haven and an ‘El Dorado’ where
professional opportunities lacking in Myanmar have mushroomed since the late 1980s. Finally, I will analyse how they have, in the process, become ‘essential outsiders’ in their new home in the Sino-Burmese border areas as brokers, partners, and neighbours.

**Historical Background: Indian and Muslim Middlemen in Colonial and Early Post-Colonial Burma**

In Myanmar, Indian migrants, whether Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, have long acted as intermediaries between state authorities (in a colonial and early postcolonial context) and the Burmese population (Mahajani 1960; Chakravarti 1971). Similar to Chinese, Armenian, and Jewish communities worldwide, Indians have long been examined through the lens of the ‘middlemen minority’, a theoretical corpus much used by social scientists from the 1970s, which has since evolved into an extensive multi-disciplinary scholarship (Bonacich 1973, Schaffer et al. 2009). Middlemen commonly act as ‘go-between’ agents who broker between dominant interest groups, the state and the local people. They often migrate into spaces where they can offer a valuable role as intermediaries and are in a position to mobilize assets and provide goods or services unavailable locally. As minorities, they subsequently form ethnic enclaves (Light et al. 1994) or immigrant niches (Waldinger 1994), in which they can perform brokering and networking activities. Highly mobile, they frequently master several languages and use their own ethnicity-based networks for communication, trade, knowledge exchange and circulation. They demonstrate much flexibility in collecting capital and mobilizing their own kin labour forces. But they maintain cultural practices distinct from those of the locals – and tend to therefore be more or less segregated from their host societies. They remain ‘outsiders’ (Chirot and Reid 1997, Nyíri 2011), but their presence as intermediaries and their brokerage skills are much needed and hardly replaceable.

The British colonial enterprise bolstered a massive flow of Indian immigrants into the Burmese province from the late the nineteenth century. Tamils, Marwaris, Bengalis, Biharis, Chettiars and others migrated first to the coastal areas of Arakan and Tenasserim, then to Rangoon and the Irrawaddy delta, and eventually to Mandalay and the northern areas after the Burmese territories were completely incorporated into the British ‘Raj’ in 1886. Familiar with British commercial and administrative practices, the colonial legal system as well as the English language, they managed to prosper as trustworthy brokers. They expanded their networks throughout the
colonial province, especially in the early 20th century, and helped establish new connections with their northern Chinese neighbour.4

About half of the Indian migrants brought by the British were Sunni Muslims. Their descendants now form the largest group among the three to four million Muslims in Myanmar today (Mahajani 1960, Chakravarti 1971, Yegar 1972, Khin Maung Kyi 2006, Taylor 2006, Egretteau 2011). The second largest group of Burmese Muslims are the Rohingyas, a segregated Sunni minority originated from the swampy borders between Bangladesh and Myanmar’s Rakhine State. Although Burmese Buddhists consider them to be Bengali immigrants, their Islamic practices are now very different from the ones observed in South Asia in general, and in the Bengal region in particular (Yegar 2002, Defert 2007, Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2008). The Rohingyas, a community of about a million today, mostly live in the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderlands, but some also settled in Mandalay, Yangon and Mawlamyaing (formerly Moulmein) in the southeast of Myanmar.5

In the late colonial era, the immigrated Indians acquired a disproportionate influence in the economy, security forces and administration of the Burmese colonial province (Khin Maung Kyi 2006, Egretteau 2011). Their success triggered strong Indophobic sentiments among local Burmese communities. Resentment against the ‘Kalas’ (or ‘foreigners from the West’ in Burmese language) was far more blatant at the time than against any other ‘outsiders’, including the Chinese minorities (Khin Maung Kyi 2006, Egretteau 2011: 35-36). After Myanmar’s Independence in 1948, extensive ‘Burmanization’ programs were launched by the Burmese postcolonial state. Strict restrictions on acquiring Burmese citizenship and the outright xenophobic policies later defined by General Ne Win’s military regime further drove scores of foreign and non-Buddhist communities out of the country in the 1960s. Muslims, in particular, were forced to assimilate to the Burman-dominated society if they wished to stay in Myanmar (Khin Khin Su 1954, Holmes 1967, Yegar 1972). Clashes between Buddhists and the

4 Their role as interpreters and informants to Chinese Hui jade merchants and mule caravan leaders traveling from Yunnan throughout Myanmar has recently been examined by Lehmann (2007) and Ma (2003).
5 Besides Burmese Muslims of Indian origins and Rohingyas, there are two other Muslim groups in Myanmar. First, the Zerbadees, or descendants of Arab, Indian or Persian traders who have intermarried with local Burmese since the 13th or 14th centuries. They form a small but rather well-assimilated community in Myanmar (Yegar 1972, 33-35, Khin Maung Yin 2005: 169, Berlie 2008: 11-12, Sulaiman 2008). And second, the Hui (Chinese Muslims) from Yunnan who have long-standing trade relations in the region. The Hui, or Panthay in Burmese, have also been well documented (Yegar 1966b, Forbes 1986, Atwill 2003, Ma 2003, Chang 2003, Sun 2011).
Indian and Muslim minorities have been a recurrent feature of Myanmar's history in the 20th century, in particular in the 1930s and during the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945. During the 1970s and 1980s, various ‘de-Islamization’ programs were also put in place by the Burmese military administration (Yegar 2002, Berlie 2008). Mosques have been burnt down and not allowed to be rebuilt by the local or state authorities ever since. Negative portrayal and stereotypes of Islam still linger. In 2012 and 2013, riots against Muslim populations in western and central Myanmar spread once more with particular severity. Many were led by Buddhist monks (Human Rights Watch 2012, 2013).

Whilst several key post-independence Burmese politicians and leading intellectuals were Muslims, the country’s various Islamic communities have since the 1960s tended to adopt a far lower public profile at the national level. Enacted in 1982, Myanmar’s latest Citizenship Law purported to strengthen the 1948 Citizenship Act. It still has legal power and has long been a major cause of resentment among the country’s Muslim communities. The law has indeed created three categories of citizens: full, associate and naturalized. It states that any individual unable to prove that his or her ancestors settled in what is Myanmar today before 1823 (and thus, before the first Anglo-Burmese war and the first waves of labor migration from British India) would not be recognized as full Burmese citizens (Taylor 2006: 675-680). Consequently, Burmese of Indian origins, whether Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims were, and still are, openly singled out as second-class citizens. Many have been repatriated back to India or Pakistan since the 1960s. After several decades of Burmanization, most of those who remain in Myanmar have become more or less forcibly integrated; they have adopted Burmese names and language (Myanma-sa), and acquired the associate or naturalized status. One notable exception is the Rohingya community. A handful of its leaders have relentlessly argued the group has been an indigenous ethnic community in Myanmar, and therefore does not need to go through a process of association or naturalization.

The deep-rooted ‘Indophobia’ in Myanmar, while remaining salient, has over time transformed into blunt ‘Islamophobia’ (Selth 2004, Egretéau 2011: 50-51). It now primarily targets the Rohingya, considered as ‘foreign’ residents, but also affects the more integrated Burmese Muslim communities, such as the Panthay (Defert 2007, Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2008, Berlie 2008). The Rohingya suffered two dramatic mass exoduses in 1977-78 and 1991-92 when 200 thousand refugees were forced to flee their native Rakhine State westwards, into neighbouring Bangladesh. Whilst thousands flee their homes in Rakhine State every year and try their luck in makeshift boats
throughout the Indian Ocean, forming a new type of ‘boat people’ (Lewa 2008, Espenilla 2010), the remaining population in Rakhine have faced recurrent persecution ever since (Grundy-Warr and Wong 1997, Mathieson 2009, Human Rights Watch 2012). As observed elsewhere in the world, with the changing of the political context from a colonial enterprise to a nationalistic and independent polity, the communities construed as ‘essential outsiders’ in the colonial era became unwanted and ‘inessential’ in the new landscape. Burmese Muslims, particularly those who had made the most of their middlemen skills before independence, were left faced with the choice of leaving the country or assimilating into the Burmese society.

Moving North: Seeking Fortune in China

It was however only with the opening up of the borders between Yunnan and Myanmar in 1988 that Burmese Muslims started to venture northwards. In the late 1980s, the Sino-Burmese borderlands witnessed a relative pacification. Bilateral trade resumed. The Chinese border town of Ruili soon transformed into the bustling heart of an increasingly lucrative trade of both legal and illegal Chinese and Burmese commodities. Whilst thousands of Chinese fortune-seekers began to flock southwards around the Burmese borders, Burmese traders who had till then been based in Myanmar’s urban trading centres such as Yangon, Mandalay, and Taunggyi, started to venture northwards, toward Ruili. The town soon became the main entry point into China for all Burmese migrants, including Muslims. There, the latter found a new economic ‘niche’ to expand their traditional activities. The stories of members of their own communities who successfully established themselves in Ruili since the late 1980s encouraged others to risk the hazardous migration northwards to Yunnan instead of following the still rather popular – but no less hazardous – route into Bangladesh or Malaysia.

It remains difficult to estimate the size of the Burmese Muslim community that has migrated to Yunnan over the past two decades. Their mobility and discretion, and the lack of reliable official data, make any attempt a challenge. Very few of these Burmese Muslims are, in fact, permanent settlers. Most of them possess Burmese identity papers (fake or real), some own Bangladeshi or Malaysian passports and are granted Chinese business visas or temporary residency certificates, which range from one week to one year, depending on their bargaining skills with the local Chinese immigration officers. Based on my research since 2009, I estimate however that by 2012 between 30,000 to 40,000 Burmese are living on the Chinese side of the
Among them, most probably 5,000 are Muslims; and four-fifths of these Muslims reside in and around Ruili and Jiegao, the border checkpoint a few miles away. In particular, about 1,000 of these Muslims were Rohingya, according to members of the local community, by 2012.

There are also a few dozen Burmese Muslim households in Baoshan, 250 kilometres north of Ruili. In the towns of Zhangfeng (Longchuan), Mangshi (Luxi) and Wanding (Wanting), as well as further away along the ‘Burma Road’ towards Kunming, Burmese Muslim traders are not the strongest competitors to the Chinese, Kachin, and Shan traders. However one exception remains: away from the main commercial axis of Mandalay-Ruili-Kunming, Jinghong in Yunnan’s Xishuangbanna Prefecture also shelters several Burmese Muslim and Rohingya families (see Figure 8.1). Over the past decade, Jinghong has become the main jade hub of Xinshuangbanna’s Prefecture.

Burmese Muslims have set up gem and jade shops there, and sell bracelets or cheap jewellery to Chinese local tourists. In contrast, other Yunnanese cities such as Tengchong or Yinjiang, although very close to the Burmese borders and looking back on a long tradition as trade hubs for Burmese gems and jade, feature no visible presence of any Burmese Muslim households (as of 2012). Burmese Muslims are also largely absent in Cangyuan, Nancan, Mengla, Lancang and other Sino-Burmese border towns in areas dominated by the Wa and Shan. There, the Chinese and other indigenous communities control the trade and circulation of commodities and people.

Some Burmese Muslims run Burmese food and halal restaurants, small guesthouses, grocery stores and cosmetic shops in Yunnan. Others find jobs as domestic workers. According to local informants some are also involved in smuggling goods, including heroin, which is locally known as ‘No. 4’. Casual Western travellers are often bluntly offered to buy some. The vast majority of Burmese Muslims, however, focus on the gem and jade business exclusively. Most of them have engaged in relatively small-scale trading, at least in comparison to the local Chinese, Shan or Kachin business communities. The wealthiest Burmese jade dealers settled in Ruili seem very well connected beyond the mere borderlands. They import boulders and stones from Myanmar and sell them to Chinese local dealers; they also look further afield for better transactions in Kunming and Guangzhou primarily. Other Burmese Muslim migrants, petty traders or street hawkers, are more likely to try their luck locally by selling cheap stones or inexpensive jewels on the local markets. Once the sales are done for the day, they travel back to Myanmar. Ruili has become a popular destination for domestic Chinese tourists. An airport was built just 90 minutes away from the town, which
links the area to Kunming, and the world. Ruili is now known throughout China as the ‘Myanmar jade gateway’, the place to shop for Burmese precious and semi-precious stones. As Chinese visitors tend to stay on Chinese soil during their holidays in Ruili or Xishuangbanna (and do not wish to cross into less developed Myanmar), the Burmese gems and jade has to be readily available on the Chinese side of the border, which further increases the value of the Burmese brokers and merchants there.

Most Burmese Muslim migrants experience China as a relatively liberal place, where setting up a business is still far easier than in Myanmar. Doing business in China (and with the Chinese), as well as developing transnational commercial networks to, and from, Yunnan can quickly pay off. Most Burmese Muslims I interviewed claim that they perceive China’s economic environment as far more flexible than its (still) state-run counterpart in Myanmar. Chinese entrepreneurs have appeared quite willing to deal with them as foreign brokers and thus allowed a Burmese commercial niche to grow in the border areas. Yunnan’s local authorities have also substantially reduced administrative hurdles during the 1990s. Tariffs are low and in many cases irrelevant, given that informal exchanges across the Yunnan-Myanmar borders are rather the norm (Set Aung 2011). The checkpoint in Jiegao, for example, was established as a Special Economic Zone in 1995, after a bridge was built over the Shweli River in 1992. Since the 1990s and thanks to local arrangements and one-day permits easily provided by Chinese immigration, anyone from Myanmar is free to move in Ruili as long as he or she contributes to the local economy. Even if corruption and patronage is rampant in Yunnan, these phenomena are considered far less of an obstacle to business than in Myanmar. Kyaw Thein, for example, a 25-year old Rohingya who lived in the city of Baoshan since 2009, explains how every year he renews his ‘green book’ – a residency certificate – for another full year without any problem as long as his business is thriving and he abstains from quarrelling with the locals.

Journey to ‘Paradise’: China as a Safe Haven

Newman (2006) and van Houtum (2005) argue that borders, beyond offering a gateway to the outside world, are also erected to substantiate alterity – home and away, the inside and the outside, the known and the unknown, the good and the evil. Borders are structured around processes of exclusion and inclusion, as Newman and Paasi (1998) further claimed. Persecuted populations cross borders in the hope of finding shelter, protection and,
in the end, a new life on the other side. China, rather than the Muslim neighbouring state of Bangladesh or the distant Malaysia and Indonesia, has since the late 1980s progressively earned a reputation as a safe religious haven among the various Muslim communities from Myanmar, especially the Rohingyas.

When I asked Burmese Muslims in Yunnan about their motivations for coming to China, most stressed religious discrimination and persecution as the main reasons why they left. Once in Yunnan, they felt a huge sense of relief and soon realized they were allowed to practice their religion far more openly than in Myanmar. In China, they could publically attend religious festivals without fearing repercussions from their neighbours. Even though Burmese Muslims are sometimes perceived negatively by locals (the stereotype on the ‘dark and dirty foreigner’ often surfaces in everyday situations), they are facing far less day-to-day xenophobic discrimination compared to in Myanmar. Behind the border, they found security and opportunities. Migrating from Buddhist-dominated Myanmar into the Yunnan borderworld was thus also a journey from a deeply antagonistic neighbouring situation to far more open and welcoming one.

The Burmese Muslims in Yunnan are exclusively Sunnis. Remarkably, they are quite well integrated into the socio-cultural networks of the Hui (Yegar 1966a, Forbes 1986, Ma 2003). They seem to participate in social activities and engage in religious work with local members of the Hui communities – a key illustration of a neighbouring process at work. However, only local Hui imams are recognized by the Chinese authorities as religious leaders. A Hui imam is thus the only one allowed to supervise Ruili’s sole mosque, which was built in 1987. An imam from Rakhine state told me that Burmese imams are nevertheless regularly spotted in town and around this mosque; they are tolerated as long as they do not preach in public, but privately. Despite their different backgrounds, Muslims in Ruili organize religious events together, such as the sharing of iftar and the sundown meal that breaks fast during the month of Ramadan.

A case in point is Mohammed Hajj. A Rohingya imam from Buthidaung township in north-western Rakhine State, he first settled in Yangon in 1972 and then moved to Ruili in late 1988, right after the political and pro-democracy upheavals in Myanmar. He has not left Ruili since. In his 70s now, he discreetly teaches Arabic and Urdu, something he could not do freely while in Myanmar. Likewise, the younger Sein Aung has lived in Ruili since 2010. He spent his teens in the former Burmese capital, Yangon. His uncle, also a Rohingya who settled in Yunnan in the early 1990s, brought him to Ruili to work in his small gem shop. ‘It’s paradise here!’ Sein Aung
enthusiastically told me about his new host country. ‘I’m very happy here’, he stressed, adding that they (the Rohingyas) could practice their religion openly and do whatever business they wanted. He cherished the relative absence of daily discrimination, compared to what he had experienced in Myanmar.

However, the Burmese Muslims are well aware of the limits of the Chinese host society and the political pressure imposed by state authorities: ‘we can’t use Facebook here in China, [whilst] we could inside Myanmar’, Zaw Min, another resourceful Rohingya in his early twenties told me. He used to work for a French NGO in Maungdaw (Rakhine State) before migrating to Ruili in 2011. Facebook has become a critically important tool for young Burmese in recent years, especially since the state censorship has been relaxed in Myanmar after 2011.

Nevertheless, for most of the Burmese Muslim communities the Chinese border acts as a positive barrier that protects them from a brutal Burmese state and a Buddhist-dominated society often prone to religious violence. Crossing the borderline is more than merely a step towards a better economic situation; it is experienced as an act of liberation. Against the background of other communities facing religious persecutions from the Chinese state authorities today, such as in Xinjiang or Tibet, this may seem odd, but the combination of refuge and fortune found in the Myanmar-Yunnan borderworld facilitates a return to their former role as middlemen minority.

‘Essential Outsiders’: Burmese Neighbours as Networkers

As a diasporic community, the Burmese Muslims possess a long history of transnational networking and dispersal. They have also developed a certain professional shrewdness derived from current experiences and based on old traditions of brokerage and long-distance commerce, especially in an age of colonial enterprises. The Chinese world they found in the Myanmar-Yunnan borderlands since the 1980s has enabled them to make the most, once more, of these assets. Even more significantly, this borderworld also offers them a space where they engage in extensive networking and commercial activities, through multi-faceted partnerships and agreements negotiated with local entrepreneurs. They become, once more, ‘essential outsiders’ (Chirot and Reid 1997) in this Chinese local business world in which they can successfully develop a commercial niche.

Many Burmese Muslims, like Syed Islam with whom this chapter started, undertook epic journeys via Northeast India, Thailand, Malaysia or even
Saudi Arabia. Abdul Salim, another young Rohingya from Rakhine State, for example, told me how he moved out of his hometown and fled into Bangladesh in 2009. From there, he sneaked into the Indian state of West Bengal and arrived in Calcutta. He continued on to Assam and reached the town of More in India’s remote state of Manipur, right at the Burmese border. There, he entered again Myanmar after paying a hefty bribe to local smugglers. He continued by bus to Mandalay thanks to his fake Burmese national identity card, and finally took another bus to the Yunnan border. Both Syed and Abdul had a member of their own community already established in Ruili (an uncle in Syed’s case, a village neighbour in Abdul’s). This connection helped them getting the necessary Chinese residency papers upon arrival and, subsequently, a job.

Recalling this skilful manoeuvring, Abdul Salim explained to me that after his arrival in Bangladesh he bought fake Bangladeshi papers from some local counterfeiters whom to contact a friend had advised him. With the fake passport, he was able to enter India legally and reach Calcutta. There, he took a train to Assam and a bus to Manipur, at the border with Myanmar. He had no problem passing all the security checkpoints that the Indian authorities regularly set up along the roads throughout a northeastern region plagued with insurgencies and a high level of criminality. To re-enter Myanmar at the border town of Tamu, he needed to switch back to a Burmese identity. To do so, he acquired a basic Burmese identity card by bribing an official and claiming he was merely a ‘Bama Muslim’ and not a Rohingya.

After he sneaked back into Myanmar by night, he continued by bus to Mandalay where he now had all options to continue his trip to Yangon, Thailand, or Yunnan. At each point of his odyssey, he found fellow Burmese who could assist him and, with the help of local underground networks, including local Bangladeshi and Indian ones, provide the necessary papers for his onward journey.

Such stories of young men venturing out contrast sharply with the image of the downtrodden Muslim refugees sweltering in camps in Bangladesh, or the ‘boat people’ stranded on Thai or Malaysian shores. Many Burmese Muslims have indeed proved to be extremely mobile and resourceful. The more fearless of them frequently move across borders without official papers. Instead, they rely on well-established clandestine networks, which they can trust. The pioneers who migrated to Yunnan in the late 1980s or early 1990s thereby played a crucial role.

U Aung Myint, for instance, a leading figure today of Ruili’s Burmese community and a member of several Chinese jade business associations,
arrived in Ruili in early 1989. Now in his fifties, he recalls how he decided to try his luck after the failure of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising in Myanmar and ventured on the arduous two-day journey from Mandalay (via Lashio) to the Chinese border. He established lucrative gem-and-jade shops and now regularly travels to Kunming and drives a Cadillac. Another businessman Mr. Nasrul Islam, now in his late 50s, runs a cosmetic and grocery shop in the city of Baoshan, some 250 kilometres further north on the road towards Kunming. During the 1988 uprising, he was working in Yangon. Hearing the news that the Chinese border was opening up, he swiftly travelled to Mandalay, and up to Muse to enter Yunnan. The story of Daw Yin Yin, a Sunni Muslim in her late 40s, is another case in point. She was sent from Yangon northwards by her family to set up a gem business in the early 1990s: first in the jade market of Mandalay, and then in Ruili, where business was reputedly growing. She arrived in Yunnan with her husband in 1992. She now owns a small gemstone shop in one of Ruili’s indoor markets. Her husband later returned to Mandalay to manage stock and supplies but continues to visit Ruili on a regular basis.

As Ruili’s economy continued to surge in the 2000s (Guo 2010), not only the Burmese Muslim community grew, but many already well-settled Burmese Muslim traders also expanded their commercial networks beyond the borderlands, throughout the thriving province of Yunnan, up to Kunming, its capital. In July 2009, U Aung Myint led to Kunming a 70-strong delegation of Ruili-based jade traders to attend an international gem fair. As Vice-President of the Yunnan Gems Traders Association, he is a respected figure increasingly used by the Chinese local authorities to settle disputes between Burmese and Chinese dealers and migrants, and act as a guarantor when the local Chinese police cracks down on illegal Burmese migrants. Although local Burmese middlemen become quite successful brokers, they are no match to the powerful state-run Chinese and Burmese jade conglomerates involved in bigger mining and extraction businesses (Khin Maung Nyunt 1995, Egreteau 2012). While they are not occupying a dominant economic position, they have managed to carve out a niche in Ruili.

Conclusion

In summary, Muslim communities of all backgrounds seem to have found in the Chinese borderlands a space to trade, live, and prosper in ways they could not dream of in authoritarian Myanmar. As the literature on border studies puts it, they use the borderline as a tool, and exploit the complex
nature of the borderworld and the legal boundaries to form a new space of interconnectivity, especially through cross-border trade and trans-border human interactions (Diener and Hagen 2009). Most have benefited from the local economic boom fostered by China’s development policies since the 1980s, and subsequently made the most of the exponential Chinese demand of jade (and more globally of Burmese natural resources and cheap labor). Those who now reside in Yunnan have obtained renewable residency permits from the local Chinese authorities, and many learned the Chinese language. They are allowed to build shops or rent stalls in local markets. They can also travel beyond Yunnan to Guangzhou, Shanghai, or even Hong Kong. Residency in Ruili, thus, opens a window to China, and consequently to the world. Their exilic journey northward can therefore be construed as an attempt not at settling down and assimilating to a new host society in Yunnan, but as an effort to regain some of the ‘essential-ness’ they previously boasted in Myanmar, but have gradually been deprived of, as ‘useful outsiders’. Their professional shrewdness and expertise in navigating and crossing borders, as well as the mediating role of the more established members of their community (such as the imams or well-established and wealthy traders) are the assets that rekindle their usefulness. The paradox is that these assets would be lost, would they fully assimilate into the Chinese society – as many did nonetheless in Myanmar’s post-colonial society. The safer and more promising bet is therefore for them to use both the border and their identity as strategic devices in the art of multi-directional, in-between ‘neighbouring’.

The Burmese Muslim communities and their post-1980s migration into the Yunnan-Myanmar borderlands therefore offer an interesting illustration of how a borderworld can be construed and used by neighbours in strategic ways. Since the opening-up of the region over two decades ago, the Sino-Burmese boundaries have acted as much as ties that bring together two economies in need of each other, as a protective wall separating two polities. Beyond the Chinese border, the Burmese Muslim migrants have found economic opportunities as well as a safe haven, where they can practice their religion – including in friendly cooperation with the local Chinese Muslim community – trade and travel freely. In comparison to what they can expect inside contemporary Myanmar, they have found in Yunnan their ‘little paradise’. There, they enjoy freedom of movement (despite regular Chinese immigration and police controls), less administrative harassment from local authorities (despite the usual bribery), and a more or less lenient attitude of Chinese provincial and state officials toward their Islamic traditions. Many regard the Chinese side of the Chinese border as an at least
temporary sanctuary, where they hope to start a better life, support their relatives back home, and maybe, one day, move on.

The combination of brokering and language skills, trade networks inside Myanmar, and diasporic solidarities has facilitated their success in the Yunnan borderworld and, in fact, much beyond it in mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia or the Persian Gulf. From these border spaces at the edges of China, they engage in neighbouring economic and social activities and make the most of the new connections. Other ethnic or religious minorities from Myanmar (such as the Kachin, the Wa, or the Shan) have certainly developed a different relationship to, and understanding of, the Chinese ‘borderworld’. Not all of these other migrant communities seem to extensively use diasporic networks and religious solidarities the way the Burmese Muslims do. But it is precisely the practice of network formation and ethno-religious solidarity that make the Burmese Muslims’ neighbouring experiences exceptional. Moreover, the region is constantly evolving along with China’s dynamism and rapid development growth. Yunnan in the 2010s has been a far different place than it used to be during the 1990s or 2000s. Since my first fieldtrip to Ruili in 2003, the configuration of the cross-border trade has already much evolved, and the place and role of the Burmese communities of traders, hawkers and shopkeepers (who are not only Muslims) have changed too. As Ruili expands, they face more competition from a wide ranges of different other communities of merchants and brokers. A comparative study in the longue durée might also reveal intriguing features, especially if socio-political tensions between the Chinese and Burmese state leadership and society continue to bring about new challenges and opportunities further into the 2010s.