

## Border Crossing and Border Maintaining among the Kachin in Ruili

Rui Sun

A few days after I arrived in Ruili – a border city in southwestern China’s Yunnan province – Ah H pang, a Kachin friend I met earlier from the Sunday worship of Pa Se Christian Church, invited me to lunch. I was amazed by how she sophisticatedly procured several specialty dishes from the vendor in fluent Burmese. After lunch, Ah H pang took me on a city tour of Ruili, where Burmese outfits – flip-flops and *longyi*<sup>1</sup> – were a common sight. There were also roadside billboards that advertised tutoring in Burmese or solicited Burmese translators. I grew up in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, one of the most ethnically diverse provinces in China. While there are 25 officially recognized minority groups in Yunnan among the total of 56 in China, the inhabitants of Kunming are predominantly Han-Chinese. Arriving in Ruili filled me with a sense of the unknown: for once I was a “guest” in my province. This acute sense of unfamiliarity in a neighboring town led me to be interested in Ruili as a research site, where several ethnic communities – Han, Dai, Jingpo, and Kachin – currently reside.

Much of my fieldwork took place at Pa Se Christian Church, frequented by many Kachin people in Ruili. Historically, Kachin people have been inhabiting Northeast Myanmar, particularly Kachin State and Shan State, bordering Yunnan. In the 1870s, missionaries established their first stations in Bhamo in Kachin State, and since then, Kachin people have gradually converted to Christianity and are primarily Christians by birth.<sup>2</sup> While there is no census data on the percentage of Christians among Kachin, the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) comprises about 400,000 members. Pa Se Christian Church became a place where Kachin communities establish and maintain their social connections, perform cultural identities, and seek livelihood possibilities in a foreign country.<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, roughly 500 Kachin people went to the sermons at Pa Se Church on Sundays,

which were conducted in the Kachin dialect. A Kachin interlocutor said, “everything here [religious rituals at Pa Se Church] is an imitation of our KBC practices. Because ours are better, and we are the majority here [among the worshippers].” After the sermons in the afternoon, there were various fellowship activities such as birthday parties, choirs, or dinner get-togethers. These activities proceeded in the Kachin language, accompanied by Kachin food, and were exclusive to the Kachin community. Such exclusivity was initially derived from the language barriers between Kachin dialects and Han Chinese, and it was further enhanced through religious practices.

Only a few members of the Kachin community felt the necessity to learn Chinese and integrate into the local society. For most of them, Ruili was the place for “working” and not for “living.” I knew a couple – living in Ruili for almost 20 years, working in the tailoring business – that spoke close to no Chinese. Their customers were also mainly from the church’s Kachin community. For them, the Chinese language was only helpful when bargaining at the wet market, for which only a few pronouns and numbers were sufficient. The couple said to me during an interview, “We are going back to Bhamo when we retire. Here is not home.”

In Ruili, more than 80% of the Kachin made a living by trading raw jade stones. There are many uncertainties embedded in such a business.<sup>4</sup> Kachin jade traders often sought their customers through church networks to reduce business risk and avoid fraud. Thus, the church further bound members of the Kachin community and limited cross-ethnic interactions.

Kachin people in Myanmar, Jingpo people in China, and Singpho people in India share the same ethnic origin and live in a similar landscape.<sup>5</sup> During the 1960s, a border demarcating China and Myanmar was established through diplomatic negotiations between the two countries. The Jingpo-Kachin people were separated into two distinct

between the transboundary Mishmi community. Mishmis in Arunachal Pradesh say that they know that their Mishmi brethren cannot openly follow their animist religious rituals and practices in China due to the prevailing communist ideology. They accord a high value to cross-border interactions between shepherds, hunters, and shamans, in order to preserve their common Mishmi animist religion, culture, and identity, which illustrates a sense of belonging that is socio-spatial.

Borderland community relations effectively look across the borderline, be it contested or otherwise, to take in both sides of the borderland.<sup>6</sup> Such transboundary human relations help create, maintain, undermine, and even evade borders. They also challenge the idea of a national homeland that is sacrosanct and only determined and controlled by the nation-state. The lived social realities and community imaginations in Arunachal Pradesh can be effectively described by social and ecological framings and worldviews, which are in stark contrast with the strategic securitized framings and worldviews offered by the nation-states. The borderland communities across the Eastern Himalayas negotiate multiple identities to imagine geographies straddling nation-state borders.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, they foreground a sense of belonging based on transboundary ecologies.

“imagined communities.”<sup>6</sup> But cross-border interactions have never ceased. Many of my Kachin interlocutors have relatives in Yunnan, while Jingpos have relatives in Kachin State. Border-crossing is by and large only a political ideology, vaguely looming over the daily transnational activities of borderland inhabitants for whom the border is more of a social and cultural boundary than a definite demarcation of geography and nation-states. Some Kachin women married Jingpo men but still have minimal interactions with other inhabitants of Ruili. They crossed the geographical boundary of the two countries but maintained the social and cultural boundaries of the Kachin community.

My ethnographic work in Ruili explores the intricacies of cross-border interactions. Consider Awang Seng’s experience, for example. Thirty-five years ago, Awang Seng’s mother married his father from Myanmar and moved to Ruili. Awang Seng, instead, grew up at his grandmother’s home in Myanmar until he turned nine years old, when his parents decided to bring him to China for primary school. Awang Seng recalled that he understood no Chinese initially and experienced difficulty keeping up with school. By the time I met him in Ruili in 2016, Awang Seng had just graduated from college in Kunming at age 28. By then, he had mostly forgotten Burmese or Kachin dialects.

Awang Seng self-identifies as Jingpo, yet he felt a sense of “dislocation” – a sense of being outside one’s own familiar cultural space – much like how I felt upon arriving in Ruili. On the one hand, he is a Jingpo man who speaks fluent Mandarin but lives within a circle of friends and relatives who are Kachin with no knowledge of Chinese. On the other hand, his Christian belief separates him from the local Han and Jingpo community, who worship ancestors and ghosts. Awang Seng attended the Sunday service at Pa Se Christian Church each week. “Preaching in Kachin dialects is ambiguous,” he said, “it is mainly for releasing emotions rather than learning the Truth.” Awang Seng’s mother also went to the Sunday service: it became their weekly meeting place.

In 2021, when the Covid-19 situation in most places of China was more or less under control, Ruili frequently emerged on the news due to resurgent outbreaks. Many confirmed cases were traced back to stowaways who sneaked from Muse (Myanmar) to Ruili (China). However, it is a paradox to call these border crossers stowaways. In the local context, crossing

the national border and entering China from Myanmar (or the other way around) is nothing more than visiting another town nearby. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, nation-states immediately tried to restrict international movement, but they have been largely unable to control the seasoned border-crossers of Ruili.

The actual border that divides Kachin from other peoples in Ruili is an intangible one, shaped by Christian practices and their strong self-identification as a distinct Kachin community. As one interlocutor puts it, “The identity of Kachin and that of Christians is inseparable. It is the church [KBC] that takes on the responsibility of preserving Kachin’s traditional culture such as teaching Kachin youngsters our language.” Religious and linguistic affinities reinforce ethnic identity and community among the inhabitants in Ruili. While Kachin people can easily cross the borderline between China and Myanmar, the boundaries between them and other local inhabitants are maintained.

Rui Sun, Ph.D. Candidate at Department of Anthropology, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Email: sunrui@link.cuhk.edu.hk

### Notes

- 1 *Longyi* is a large apron wearing like a long skirt which is popular among both women and men in Myanmar.
- 2 Leach, Edmund Ronald. 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London: G. Bell and Sons.
- 3 Ma, Juli and Rui Sun. 2018. “Miandian Keqinren zai Yunnan Ruili de zongjiao shenghuo yanjiu” (缅甸克钦人在云南瑞丽的宗教生活研究 The religious life of the Burmese Kachin people in Ruili, Yunnan). *Shijie zongjiao wenhua (世界宗教文化 World Religious Cultures)* (3): 76–82.
- 4 Møller, Henrik Kloppenborg. 2017. “The Potentials of Feicui: Indeterminacy and Determination in Human-Jade Interactions in South-West China.” In Susanne Bregnbæk and Mikkel Bunkenborg eds. *Emptiness and Fullness: Ethnographies of Lack and Desire in Contemporary China*. Berghahn Books.
- 5 Sadan, Mandy. 2013. *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*. Oxford: Oxford university press.
- 6 Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.



Fig. 1: The eastern Himalayas stretching from the Mishmi Hills to Tibet, straddling across the Sino-Indian borderlands. (Photo by the author, 2013).

India or across the border in China for the traditional medicine market.<sup>4</sup> The nation-state of India invokes the hard border in the Sino-Indian borderlands; in practice, however, this border is quite fuzzy and fluid, with Mishmi hunters and shepherds having sporadic interactions across it. However, such interactions happen not through defiance by the local communities, and the nation-state is often cognizant of such transboundary encounters and interactions.

The number of Mishmi traditional shamans (priests), who conduct the animist customs in community festivals and family ritual offerings, has fallen significantly on the Indian side. Meanwhile, almost none exist in the Mishmi villages on the Chinese side. Mishmis from the Chinese side pay tribute to Mishmi priests from the Indian side to conduct rituals. This points towards a unique transnational exchange of rituals, offerings, and animist belief systems

## Infrastructuring shared borderland ecologies

The securitized calculations of China and India have brought both countries to gather their strategic footprint along the borderlines through infrastructuring the borderland. The natural features that mark these borderlands (e.g., forests, mountains, and rivers) cannot by themselves serve as sovereignty markers on territory; rather, they have to be infrastructured in certain ways in order to be able to serve as effective sovereignty markers. The process of securitizing and infrastructuring these borderlands has brought roads, railways, mega hydropower dams, oil and natural gas drilling projects, and mining activities to both sides of the border. Several dams are already constructed and commissioned by China, and many are in the pipeline in India. In a race to dam the transboundary Brahmaputra, both China and India have put the shared borderland ecology of the Himalayas and its communities at risk.

The hydropower development plans by India on the Tawang Chuu and the Nyamjang Chuu are a case in point. These have faced continuing protests by the Monpa community, who straddle the transboundary spaces around the tri-junction between India, Bhutan, and China. The dams threaten sacred sites revered by transboundary communities in the region. They also threaten the habitat of the black-necked crane, considered to be the reincarnation of the Sixth Dalai Lama, who was born in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. The frictions we witness in the Sino-Indian borderlands operate at multiple levels. Dominant among them is the friction between the nation-states in a securitized framing.

The friction is evident between, on the one hand, infrastructuring borderlands to achieve state presence, order, and control, and, on the other hand, the worldviews of borderland communities. This needs reconciliation through a sustained process of dialogue to protect shared ecologies across the transboundary Himalayas.

Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, Visiting Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, India. Email: mirzalibra10@gmail.com

### Notes

- 1 van Schendel, W. 2013. ‘Afterword: Making the most of Sensitive Borders’, in Gellner, D. N. (ed.). *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia: Non-State Perspectives*. Duke University Press.
- 2 For more on the Doklam incident, please see Jacob, J. 2017. “Doklam: India-China cold front to continue”, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/india-china-in-doklam/>
- 3 Gardner, K. 2019. Moving Watersheds, Borderless Maps, and Imperial Geography in India’s Northwestern Himalaya. *The Historical Journal* 62 (1): 149-170.
- 4 Aiyadurai, A. 2011. ‘Wildlife Hunting and Conservation in Northeast India: A Need for an Interdisciplinary Understanding’, *International Journal for Galliformes Conservation*, Vol. 2, 61-73.
- 5 Evans, R. 2013. ‘The Perils of Being a Borderland People: On the Lhotshampas of Bhutan’, in Gellner, D. N. (ed.). *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia: Non-State Perspectives*. Duke University Press.
- 6 Gohain, S. 2020. *Imagined Geographies in the Indo-Tibetan Borderlands: Culture, Politics, Place*. Amsterdam University Press.