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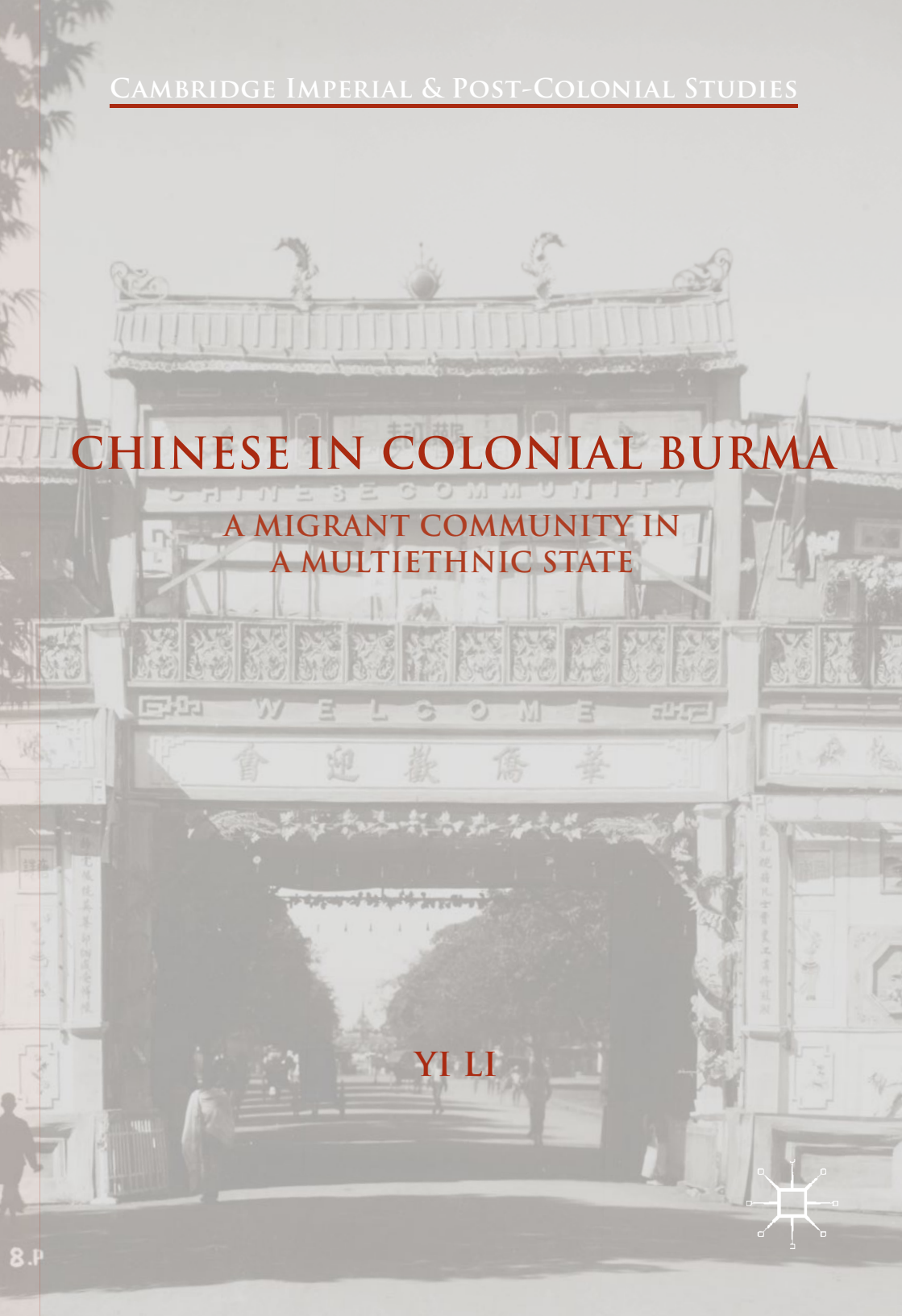

Chinese in Colonial Burma

A Migrant Community in a Multiethnic State

Yi Li

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For Julio

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* Chapter 2 and Map 2 in this book are revised and extended from "Chapter 12: Transformation of the Yunnanese community along the Sino–Burma border: a case study in the southwest during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" by Yi Li, which first appeared in *Imperial China and Its Southern Neighbours*, edited by Victor H. Mair and Liam Kelly (2015), pp. 291–315 (25 pages), and reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg.

* Tables 1.1 and 1.2 first appared in my article for the *Overseas Chinese History Studies* 2 (2015), and are reproduced here with permission.

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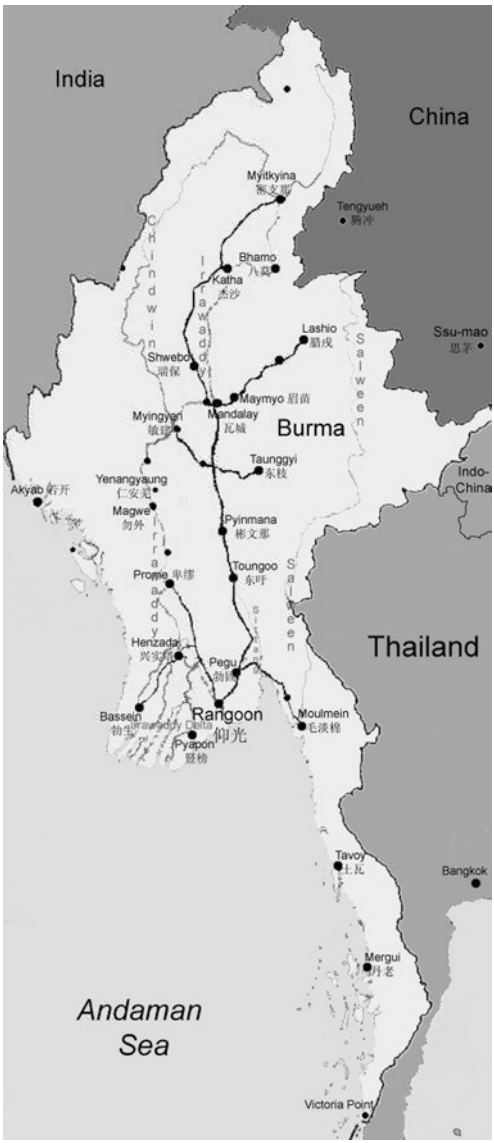

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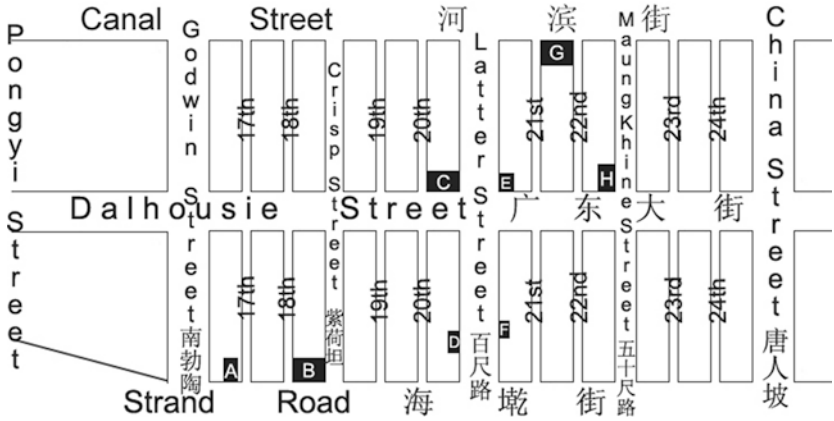

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In a letter dated December 20, 1961, Chen Yi-Sein, a junior Chinese scholar from Rangoon in his late 30s, announced his most sincere aspiration, stating that "I have decided to dedicate my entire life to the study of Burmese History and the history of Chinese in Burma."[1] This letter of self-introduction was sent to Hsu Yun-Tsiao, one of the founders of the *Nanyang Xuehui* (South Sea Society)[2] and an established figure in the study of Southeast Asian Chinese in post-war Singapore, then the center of Chinese culture and education in Southeast Asia. Half a century on, the slightly over-eager but fully determined self-announcement, marking the first-ever attempt of writing a history for the Chinese in Burma, is still palpable today.

Born in the Irrawaddy Delta town of Pyapon to a Cantonese father in 1924, Chen grew up in Lower Burma and took refuge in wartime China before returning to Rangoon after World War II (WWII). He was a member of the Burma Historical Commission (now the Myanmar Historical Commission) from its inauguration in 1955 and a part-time lecturer at the Rangoon University in 1957.[3] In the following decades, Chen would publish numerous articles on the history of early Sino-Burmese interactions and Chinese settlement in Burma in English, Burmese, and Chinese.[4] Soon after the above-mentioned letter was sent to Singapore, a Burmese-Chinese

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dictionary, *A Model Burmese-Chinese Dictionary*,[5] compiled singlehandedly by Chen, was published in Rangoon, and it remains one of the most important references for language learners ever since.

Chen Yi-Sein was part of a small group of Chinese intellectuals, or "men of letters," from Rangoon's Chinatown in the 1950s and early 1960s who saw the importance of writing a history for this ethnic minority, ex-migrant community in a newly independent Southeast Asian nation-state. Between January and December 1962, a special column, *Daguangcheng Yehua* (Dagon City's Night Talks), appeared in the Rangoon-based Chinese newspaper, *Xin Yangguang Bao* (New Yangon Daily). It told stories and anecdotes about the Rangoon Chinese community from 1911 and was written by Huang Chuoqing, a Rangoon-born Cantonese and self-educated journalist.[6] In the meantime, Chinese publications, often funded by community associations for special occasions, were filled with their own histories and legends. Among these articles and semi-chronicles, a notable one was a long list of entries recording significant community events for the 40 years between 1911 and 1950, first published as an annex to a special anniversary issue of a Rangoon Chinese commercial association.[7]

However, this self-motivated history-writing effort by the community was doomed. After the 1962 coup, Myanmar took up the "Burmese Way to Socialism," and the political environment for its Chinese population deteriorated rapidly.[8] The hostility toward ethnic Chinese reached its peak in June 1967 when an anti-Chinese riot broke out in Yangon[9] and forced many of them to leave the country. Chen Yi-Sein eventually settled in Taipei, while both Huang Chuoqing and Chen Xiaoqi, the compiler of the list of 40 years of events, left for mainland China.[10] Lacking both the facility and motivation from within the community and the availability of primary sources to foreign scholars, the Chinese community in colonial Burma became one of the most understudied subjects in the history of modern Southeast Asia and the history of Chinese migration, with the exception of a handful of sporadic and fragmented attempts.[11]

1.1 Chinese in Burma

The current unsatisfying situation of scholarly works does no justice to the long and rich historical exchange between Myanmar and China. The lands that today belong to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar are by no means a strange place for the Chinese. Textual and archaeological evidence indicates that Sino-Burmese interactions, via overland routes[12]

and maritime networks,[13] can be traced back to the second century BCE.[14] Unfortunately, records on Chinese activities in interior and coastal Burma remain too insufficient for the time being to allow for anything more than speculation about the scale of Chinese settlement.

Nonetheless, being adjacent to China's southwest frontier, various ancient kingdoms in Burma experienced continuous inflows of Chinese peoples and products. These interactions were often peaceful, but there were occasional bouts of violence: the invasion by the Yuan (Mongol) army of Pagan in the 1270s and 1280s; the tragic ending of the fleeing Yongli, the last Ming Emperor, and his entourage outside the capital of the Toungoo Dynasty near Sagaing in 1661; and the Sino-Burmese War launched by the Qing Emperor Qianlong in the 1760s, to name just a few episodes, all brought waves of Chinese soldiers, officials, and ordinary people to Burma. Shortly before the British arrival, a Chinese traveler in the late eighteenth century observed that "western products were assembled in Rangoon before being transported to Canton and Hokkien."[15]

Despite the longevity of the Chinese presence in Burma, this book focuses only on the colonial period, beginning in 1826, the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826), and the start of British rule in parts of Burma that ushered in the transition of Burma from a pre-modern Southeast Asian kingdom to a European colony. More importantly, this was also the era when Chinese arrived in significant numbers over a sustained period of time, for many beginning a period of permanent settlement in the area even though these waves of Chinese migrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, partly due to the European colonial expansion in the region, were not the first of their kind. The investigation ends in 1942, when the Japanese army occupied Burma along with most of Southeast Asia. From the close of WWII, colonial regimes throughout the region were replaced with independent nation-states one after another. This radically changed the prevailing dynamics of migration from China, and the flow of migrants never returned to its previous level. To some extent, 1942 marked the end of several centuries of Chinese migration as well as British imperial control over this region, even though the colonial government in Burma would not see its official end until the beginning of 1948.

There are, of course, historical milestones during this long, 116-year period, in Burma, in the British Empire, and in China. For the British overseas territories in the East, the Indian Rebellion of 1857 not only marked the end of the East India Company but also restructured the

administrative system of British India, of which (Lower) Burma was then a part. The next administrative reform, known as Diarchy, aiming to encourage indigenous political participation in light of the pressure of Indian nationalism, was introduced to Burma in 1923. Beyond the borders of British India, pubic engagement in and opposition to empire-building at the turn of the twentieth century in Britain,[16] regime changes, regional warfare, and foreign invasion in China inevitably made their respective impacts on the Chinese in Burma, however far away these events were, demonstrating the extension of linkages beyond national and continental borders.

The most important and direct influences on the formation and development of the Burmese Chinese community came from within. The annexation of Rangoon and Lower Burma after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852) saw the arrival of colonialism to the region and its multiethnic residents, including an increasing number of southern Chinese recently sailing from coastal China and other nearby Southeast Asian ports. Rangoon was chosen as the provincial capital for the newly established Burma province of British India in 1862, where the largest Chinese quarter in Burma, the Rangoon Chinatown, was designated and flourished thereafter. In 1886, the British completed its final annexation, thus officially bringing Upper Burma and its peoples (including the southwestern Chinese who had plied cross-border caravan routes from Yunnan for centuries) into the British colonial world. Over the next few decades, the Sino-Burmese border was secured in the north, and large-scale development projects, especially the opening of rice fields in the Irrawaddy Delta, were implemented with considerable success in the south. All of these not only redefined the social and economic landscapes of the new colonial state but also supported, in every aspect, an expanding migrant society for the Chinese.

Table 1.1 shows a dramatic population increase in Burma from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. Within half a century, almost 10 million people, majority of whom were immigrants from India, were added to the total population. In the 1920s, Rangoon became one of the largest immigrant ports in the world, its inflow of immigrants exceeding that of New York.[17] The same period also witnessed a steady increase in its Chinese population. The biggest leap occurred within the three decades between 1881[18] and 1911, during which the number of Chinese increased nearly tenfold. However, throughout the colonial era, the Chinese remained an absolute minority in the total population, reaching slightly over 1 percent in 1931, the last time the census was taken before WWII.

Table 1.1 Chinese population in Burma, 1881–1931

Year	*Chinese population*	*Total population*	*Percentage*
1881	12,962	3,736,771	0.35
1891	41,457	7,722,053	0.54
1901	62,486	10,490,624	0.60
1911	122,834	12,115,217	1.01
1921	149,060	13,212,192	1.13
1931	193,594	14,667,146	1.32

Sources: Data adapted from Government of India, *Census 1891, IX, Burma Report* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1892); *Census of India, 1901, XII, Burma* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Burma, 1902); *Census of India, 1911, IX, Burma* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Burma, 1912); *Census of India, 1921, X, Burma* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Burma, 1922); Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 41–48

1.2 Burma in the British Imperial World and the Southeast Asian Chinese Maritime Network

Colonial Burma presented a peculiar case in the British Empire, and recently its unique position has been noticed and re-examined by a number of historians.[19] Burma was a late entry to the British imperial world (first confrontation in 1824, final annexation in 1886) and occupied a critical location at the crossroads of South, East, and Southeast Asia. The initial motivation of Calcutta to annex Burma could be summarized as being twofolded: to secure India's northeast frontier and to open up a direct route to China.[20]

The irony is, when the territorial expansion was finally achieved in 1886, the original plan was no longer valid, or at least, not as urgent as it used to be. Access to China had been secured on the Chinese southeast coast after the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), and the establishment of Hong Kong provided a reliable base for Anglo-Chinese exchange, both of which made the southwest hinterland route from Burma less desirable, if not entirely redundant. As for the frontier security of India, the 1857 rebellion and rising Indian nationalism appropriately reminded the British that the real threat was from within the Empire, not from beyond its border.

This was the moment when the third connection surfaced, that is, Burma was first and foremost a Southeast Asian country that shared more commonalities with Siam and the Straits Settlements than with either India or China. In fact, Calcutta had realized its mis-orientation quite earlier on and made considerable, if not explicit, adjustments soon after. If the

First Anglo-Burmese War was masterminded from Calcutta and fought by armies from Bengal and Madras Presidencies, whose rank and file had their entire career based in South Asia,[21] both the person who negotiated the Treaty of Yandabo (1826) with the Burmese Kingdom of Ava at the conclusion of the First Anglo-Burmese War (John Crawfurd)[22] and the British Resident at the court of Ava afterward (Henry Burney)[23] were East India Company men with extensive experiences in Southeast Asian locales such as Siam, Singapore, Malaya, and Cochinchina. Calcutta's adjustment was more evident subsequently even though Burma was nevertheless created as the newest province of British India after the Second Anglo-Burmese War. The first generation of district commissioners in Lower Burma (such as Arthur Phayre, later the first Chief Commissioner of British Burma) had considerable Southeast Asian knowledge and an eye (and ear) to local cultures, languages, and customs.

Similarly, Chinese immigrants, especially those who traveled over the sea to Rangoon and coastal towns, often had spent time in other Southeast Asian ports before heading to Burma. Well-established Chinese communities in Bangkok, Batavia, and, in particular, the British settlements of Penang and Singapore provided the much-needed guidance and set models for their kinsmen in the newly opened Burma. Over time, Burma firmly established itself as the westernmost node (the tiny Chinatown in Calcutta excluded) of the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Chinese maritime network in *Nanyang* (South Sea).[24]

Burma's late entry into the British imperial world and the Southeast Asian Chinese maritime network meant Burma had a lot to learn—a whole set of well-tested protocols made ready by its better established peers, even though the knowledge developed elsewhere was not always suitable for Burma. Indeed, both the colonial government and the Chinese migrant community were active in transplanting discourse and practices to the new colony and made Burma the last and the largest social "Experimental Garden" in the region.

Until 1937, Burma remained a province of India no matter how awkward this administrative arrangement had proven to be. A direct result of being part of India was a demographic imbalance. Indian migrants outnumbered any other migrant group and many local ethnicities in colonial Burma. In the extreme case of Rangoon, Indians surpassed the local-born Burmese and became the largest ethnicity from 1901 (Table 1.2), essentially making Rangoon an Indian city on Burmese land.

It is under this multilayered intersection that this study positions itself. Within Burma, comparisons between two "Foreign Asian" migrants, the

Table 1.2 Distribution of population by birthplace in Burma and Rangoon, 1891–1911

Province of Burma

	1891		*1901*		*1911*	
	Figure	*Percentage*	*Figure*	*Percentage*	*Figure*	*Percentage*
Born in Burma	7,282,213	95.71	9,888,124	94.26	11,465,246	94.64
Born in India	280,719	3.69	415,953	3.96	493,699	4.08
Born in China	23,060	0.30	43,328	0.41	75,365	0.62
Total	7,608,552		10,490,624		12,115,217	

Rangoon Town

	1891		*1901*		*1911*	
	Figure	*Percentage*	*Figure*	*Percentage*	*Figure*	*Percentage*
Born in Burma	88,555	49.11	105,343	44.85	122,407	41.73
Born in India	83,052	46.06	117,713	50.12	153,478	52.33
Born in China	4915	2.73	7939	3.38	11,759	4.01
Total	180,324		234,881		293,316	

Sources: Data adapted from Government of India, *Census 1891, IX, Burma Report* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1892); *Census of India, 1901, XII, Burma* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Burma, 1902); *Census of India, 1911, IX, Burma* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Burma, 1912)

Indian and the Chinese, are drawn throughout this book, especially in the second part. Many perceived "characteristics" of Burmese Chinese were interpreted as being derived from a unique experience of a Chinese community in a Southeast Asian colony governed by Europeans with an India-based system. In the meantime, references to other Southeast Asian places, especially the Straits Settlements, are frequently made in order to trace the evolution of so many things that were practiced in Burma. But after all, the difference between British Burma and the Straits Settlements regarding their "Foreign Asian" immigrants was decisive: the former was dominated by the Indian with just a tiny minority of Chinese and the latter vice versa (Table 1.3). As this book shows, numbers matter tremendously in our story.

Table 1.3 Percentage of Indian and Chinese population in Burma and the Straits Settlements, 1891

	Burma (percent)	*The Straits Settlements (percent)*
Chinese	0.54	44.50
Indian (For Burma, it includes Hindu castes, Sikh, and Musalman)	5.50	10.52
Major indigenous group (For Burma, it includes Burmese, Talaing, Shan, Karen Pwo, Karen Sgau, Karenni, Chin, and Kachin; for the Straits Settlements, it refers to Malay and other natives of the Archipelago)	95.79	41.59

Sources: Data from Merewether, E. M., *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlement Taken on the 5th April 1891* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1892); Government of India, *Census 1891, IX, Burma Report* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1892)

By recognizing Burma's peculiar position in the British imperial world and the Southeast Asian Chinese maritime network and positioning the Burmese Chinese community at the junction of those complicated and dynamic frameworks, this book attempts to bring trans-territorial influences into a local context. Post-war study on overseas Chinese has shifted from being based on nation-state[25] to emphasizing transnational connectivity,[26] and Chinese immigrants are often portrayed as struggling between conflicting identities.[27] Each approach represents an insightful yet potentially limited perspective.[28] The case of Chinese in Burma, peculiar as it was, could be an interesting site to explore the combination of both local- and transnational-based approaches without conflict. The unique position of Burma meant the Chinese there had to face something that was possible only in this particular place. However, almost every element in this highly localized experience had precedents elsewhere, which Burma, as a latecomer, had to inherit, digest, and improvise, either out of convenience or necessity.

1.3 Structure of the Book

Being situated at the geographical and discursive crossroad gives to the Chinese community in Burma two distinctive features: members of the community came from both the southeast coast of China and its southwest hinterlands and the community had a small population and, therefore, limited influences in every aspect.

This book is divided into two parts, touching upon the two features, respectively. Part 1 looks at the process of "coming to Burma" by two different Chinese migrant groups with distinct regional features and how they settled down in two different parts of colonial Burma. Part 2 explores how the Chinese immigrants, despite their internal divisions, were perceived, presented, and transformed in this colonial state by colonial, community, and transnational institutions and found a way of "being Burmese Chinese" under more than a century of colonial rule in a multiethnic state.

1.3.1 Coming to Burma

In many respects, the Burmese Chinese community was a combination of several concurrent communities with different backgrounds, orientations, and expectations, albeit all holding a singular racial identification that was understood in the general colonial literature. The notion of a unified Chinese overseas community, though often advocated by politicians and scholars, is problematic. The concept of the Overseas Chinese, like the Chinese in China, has never been a homogeneous one that fits all of its members, and the vagueness of this term cannot be avoided or ignored in any study of Chinese diaspora.

In the case of Burmese Chinese, the differences could not be more obvious. Here we have Yunnanese, who were based in landlocked southwest China, trading with Burma by caravans across the mountainous Sino-Burmese borderlands and moving around in the area between western Yunnan and the former Burmese capitals of Ava, Amarapura, and Mandalay. Then we have Cantonese and Hokkien, coastal peoples who had traditional access to the high seas in the southeast Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. By then, they were familiar faces on the sea and in many ports of Southeast Asia. Located in the southern periphery of the Middle Kingdom, Yunnan, Guangdong, and Fujian all have unique histories of transformation from frontier lands to well-integrated Chinese provinces. However, domination, either politically or culturally, by the main power center in Northern China was far from complete.[29] Hence, these regional cultures diverged distinctively from each other and from other parts of China, from temple to cemetery, from dialect to cuisine. It was these multiple Chinese regional groups and their subsequent interactions, not to be found easily in other maritime Chinese migrant communities, that made the Burmese Chinese more than a unitary entity.

Historians have long urged for the incorporation of Yunnan into the study of Southeast Asia.[30] In this book, the inclusion of Yunnan is more

than desirable, it is inevitable. The Yunnanese were an inseparable part of the Chinese community and Yunnan shared a long border with colonial Burma. It is under this paradigm that Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to the community-building and communal networks of the Yunnanese in Upper Burma and the Hokkien and Cantonese in Lower Burma. This also corresponds to a conventional category that divides the Chinese in Burma into the "Mountain Chinese" (Yunnanese) and the "Maritime Chinese" (Hokkien and Cantonese), a concept first suggested by Victor Purcell in the early 1950s.[31]

However, under colonial rule and especially in the twentieth century, the administration was firmly established, the co-existence of multiple ethnic subjects was evident, and modern technological innovations were introduced. All these significantly facilitated inter-province communication between Lower and Upper Burma, and the exchange between the Yunnanese Chinese and Hokkien/Cantonese Chinese was irreversibly enhanced. Meanwhile, boundaries along ethnic lines were rigidly defined as part of the colonial policy in the multiethnic state. This de-regionalized process was further accelerated by the growing Chinese nationalism brought to Burma by transnational agencies with political agendas (to be discussed in Chapter 6). Chapter 2 argues that the loss of free spirits and mobility in the Southeast Asian highland, or the "Zomia" as James Scott advocates,[32] and increased adherence to the perceived image of "Chinese," largely based on the southern Chinese experiences, were acutely felt among the Yunnanese who had been the "old Burma hands" in Upper Burma long before the arrival of the British. The colonial presence, no matter how nominal it might seem, played a decisive role in the shaping of the Yunnanese group and, eventually, the Chinese community in Burma as a whole. It is not an exaggeration to say that on the eve of the Japanese invasion, a singular "Burmese Chinese" community, with regional differences largely downplayed, nearly managed to emerge.

1.3.2 Being Burmese Chinese

The second part deals with one central question: what best defined the "Burmese Chinese" and how did that definition come into being. Focusing on three common characteristics recognized by both contemporary literature and the present-day Chinese community in Myanmar, three chapters here trace the formation and development of three great "myths" of the Burmese Chinese: they were successful traders, purveyors of morally corrupt vices, and silent onlookers with no interest in politics.

These myths were neither confined in colonial Burma nor on ethnic Chinese. Myths of Asian peoples that were created, disseminated, and challenged—in imagination and reality—have been a consistent theme in post-colonial studies.[33] Recent imperial historiography places considerable emphasis on the mutual dynamics of colonial knowledge formation and the legitimacy and efficiency of colonial regimes, both at the peripheries and in the metropolis.[34] This study of an Eastern community in a European colony finds this approach, inevitably influenced by Saidian and Foucauldian perspectives, useful. Here, the abstract concept of knowledge is understood and presented by individual and community experiences of the subject itself and others related to it. By analyzing how these experiences formed and transformed in a colonial state, we could stitch this piece of information to the regional and global history of colonial knowledge production.[35]

However, a colonial discourse is more than a product of the ruling colonial power alone, and it is dangerous to "see colonial power as an all-embracing, transhistorical force, controlling and transforming every aspect of colonised societies."[36] Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss how multiple dynamics made their respective contributions and how the resulting discourse took in many influences that functioned over time. Agencies from the Chinese Empire and later the Republic of China, for example, employed a similar methodology to the same subject community as its European colonial counterpart did.

In retrospect, and with evidence, these chapters carefully scrutinize and sufficiently de-mystify the three most commonly accepted characteristics of the Chinese in Burma and challenge a notion of "being Burmese Chinese" that bases itself on certain stereotypes. However, for many in colonial Burma, including the Chinese themselves, these impressions were so strong that they became defining features of what it was to be Burmese Chinese.

1.4 Limits of the Current Study

Being the first step to a systematic re-examination of the subject after the unsuccessful attempt by the community intellectuals in the 1960s, this book never pretends to be a comprehensive chronicle of the Chinese in colonial Burma. With limited sources and historiography, and the huge scope the subject covers, the present work endeavors simply to provide a starting point for, and an inspiration to, further scholarly investigation in the future.

Most primary sources in this book come from English and Chinese archives. Despite their problematic nature,[37] they proved to be the most accessible and highly usable materials. The references to Chinese activities