Li Yi

_Chinese in Colonial Burma: A Migrant Community in A Multiethnic State._

This book is a bold venture into the understudied world of Burmese Chinese life, ca 1826-1942. Li’s goals are at once lofty and humble. She traces the development of the Cantonese, Hokkien, and Yunnanese communities while also seeking to explain how these migrants and their descendants came to constitute a loosely integrated Burmese Chinese community in a place that was both a particular outpost of the British empire and a part of the Southeast Asian Chinese maritime network. Given the scarcity of secondary work and the nature of extant sources, this is a tall order, as Li knows better than anyone. Thus, she characterizes her work as “merely a fragmented sketch, or a prelude to a possibly much grander picture” (12). More than a fragmented sketch, this work sets agendas for future research. Building on the late Adam McKeown’s approaches to Chinese migrant networks, Li seeks to place Burmese Chinese in a larger comparative and regional perspective while also focusing on the peculiarities of migrant community-building in the colony itself.

The book is divided into two parts, with Part I (Chapters 2 and 3) devoted to the histories of first the overland (Yunnanese) and then the maritime (Hokkien, Cantonese) Chinese migrations. The goals are to investigate the communal networks and community-building patterns that undergirded life in Burma’s three initially distinct Chinese communities. Part II is even more ambitious, seeking to assess “what best defined the ‘Burmese Chinese’ and how […] that definition [came] into being” (10). What follows are three chapters (Chapters 4-6) devoted to a sophisticated analysis of how the Burmese Chinese, “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’” (9).

The second chapter introduces Yunnanese migration and settlement, providing a clear narrative, beginning with the pre-colonial era and continuing through the development of the colonial state. The main goal is to argue how colonial state policy, as well as increasing interaction with the Hokkien and Cantonese, led many Yunnanese to identify as Burmese Chinese and to conform to a “perceived image of ‘Chinese,’ […] largely based on the southern Chinese experiences” (10). This is where the choice to begin with the Yunnanese proves curious. Not only was northern Burma, where most Yunnanese migrants lived, brought under British control much later than Lower Burma, where Hokkien and Cantonese initially settled, but it is hard to assess whether the Yunnanese were imitating their southern counterparts, who are not introduced until the
following chapter. When it comes to how the Yunnanese were influenced by British colonial rule, moreover, the evidence presented is ambiguous. Li argues that state policies forced Yunnanese to choose either loyalty to China or devotion to community-building as immigrants in a colonial state. Little evidence is mobilized, however, to prove that many people (outside of one extended family) made such clear choices, although Li does have strong evidence that many migrants devoted themselves to building community institutions, including merchant associations, schools, and temples. Future work might follow up on Li’s sketch of Yunnanese life to see if, indeed, colonial state-building “forced the sojourning Yunnanese to identify themselves as a migrant community in Burma for the first time” and, along with the Hokkien and Cantonese, to form “a shared profile of ethnic Chinese” (24). Based on the primary evidence encountered in my own work, I think it possible to make such a case, but the evidence mobilized here is as yet insufficient.

The third chapter explores the creation of Hokkien and Cantonese communities in southern Burma’s Irrawaddy Delta. The chapter begins with an ingenious composite sketch of a Hokkien migrant’s experiences in moving to Burma. This allows Li to examine the importance of clan, native place, and community organizations (temple, secret society). As in many places throughout the Chinese world, these organizations provided migrants with support and protection, whether they settled in rural areas or in Rangoon itself. Clans and temples not only provided migrants with institutions familiar from other parts of the Chinese world but were adjusted to colonial Burma, providing, for example, dispute settlement for migrants. Thus, the maritime Chinese of Burma imported methods of community and network formation while also adjusting them to the realities of colonial Burma.

In Chapters Four and Five, Li shifts from community-building to image-making, arguing that the colonial state intentionally created conflicting images of its Chinese migrants. Migrants themselves sometimes participated in these image-making projects. The two images at issue here are (1) Chinese as skillful entrepreneurs, promoted to sell Burma as an economically successful colony, and (2) Chinese as dangerous criminals involved in vices such as opium smuggling and gang violence, promoted to support increasing efforts to keep internal order. In demonstrating that the colonial state sought to emphasize Chinese entrepreneurial prowess, Li examines two publications, Twentieth-Century Impressions of Burma (1910) and Who’s Who in Burma (1926), in which her skillful analysis reveals that the editors sought, with the active support of Chinese subjects, to craft both individual and collective images that emphasized the elite-Chinese business community. In reading these and other English-language publications, one would be immersed in images of