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"From Congested Identities to Contested Identifications: The Shifting China-Burma Relations and Categorizations of Chinese Migrants in Burma, 1740-1940"¹

by

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Introduction

China's relationship with Southeast Asia has undergone serious reevaluation in the past twenty years, both in terms of how we perceive the history of that relationship (Hamashita 1997, Sun 2000) and in terms of how our changing understanding of that relationship requires adjusting how we understand Southeast Asia as a region and as an accurate unit of analysis (Liu 2000). For historians, the record of official state relations was once the nearly sole focus of the study of the relationship between China and Southeast Asia. The historiography is balancing out significantly due to efforts to understand the roles and history of Overseas Chinese who settled in Southeast Asia throughout the early modern and colonial periods (Blusse 1986), as well as in the present (McKeown 1999). We also know more about the overall sub-regional groups of Chinese and their merchant activities in Southeastern China (Ng 1983) and Overseas (Wang 1990 & 1996). Although this paper focuses specifically upon the Chinese in Burma, it is in the

¹ The author has benefited considerably from conversations with Hong Liu, Takeshi Hamashita, Laichen Sun, James Chin Kong, and Atsuko Naono concerning the Overseas Chinese in Burma. Comments made by various scholars during the presentation of a related paper, "The External and Internal Sides of Chinese-ness: Colonial Historiography and the 'Overseas Chinese' in Burma," delivered as an EAI lecture on 29 September 2000, have also proved invaluable.

context of a broader regional perspective and suggests that these issues are of relevance to understanding the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia as a whole.²

Furthermore, this paper is concerned chiefly with Burmese and European accounts of the Chinese in Burma, in part because the Chinese sources have received thorough attention by scholars well-versed in the Chinese-language literature (for a survey of this literature, see Huber 1909, 662-680; Stargadt 1971, 38-62; and Sun 1997). And, with a few exceptions (Zhu c.1584), this literature tells us little of the actual activities of Chinese resident in most of Burma during this period (with the exception of northeastern Burma). Most importantly, however, it will be one contention of this paper that the acceptance of state documentation and state-centred historical narratives, such as the bulk of Chinese-language sources, as providing the authoritative historical narrative of the Chinese in Burma has led to a misunderstanding of their identity and place in Burmese history for the last several centuries (especially the nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

As Prasenjit Duara has explained, in his analysis of the first half of the twentieth century in Chinese history, there is a tension between local, regional, and state-centred historical narratives that should be identified and kept in mind when one studies a country's history (Duara 1995). There has not been, however, a significant effort in this direction in the prevailing historiography on Burma and of the sub-national Chinese migrant groups and their histories in Burma remain largely ignored. This is starting to change, specifically for the Burma's postwar history, but to a far lesser extent for the many centuries of migration from China into Burma prior to the Second World War. Hokkien, Gwangdong, Hakka, Teochew, and other migrants from China (especially the Southeastern maritime provinces) in Burma have been viewed in the secondary literature as Chinese nationals, rather than as different ethnic or sub-ethnic groups. This inability to separate people and their history from the nation-state paradigm continues (Charney 1999).

I

² This perspective was strongly encouraged during the author's postgraduate education in seminars with Bill Frederick (Ohio), Vic Lieberman (Michigan), and John Whitmore (Michigan).

Chinese Migrants in Precolonial Burma: an Indigenous State-centred Perspective

The Kingdom of Burma's historical relationship with the Empire of China was framed by China's longstanding tribute system. The Chinese tribute system governed the celestial empire's relationship with the small petty states along the rim of the middle kingdom. Yearly royal tribute missions were sent from Southeast Asian courts to Peking and regalia and imperial charter granting sovereignty to Southeast Asian rulers, sometimes with a Chinese "princess" to boot, were provided in return. Failure to pay tribute, or the usurpation of the throne of a local ruler tributary to the China sometimes led to a imperial punitive mission. Over the course of the thirteenth to late eighteenth centuries, Burma was invaded by Chinese armies many times for similar reasons.³

The tribute-system and Chinese-Burmese state relations also had an important impact on Burmese perceptions of Chinese migrants in Burma. One side of the Burmese state-centred perspective was that Chinese migrants consisted of one homogenous migrant group. The Burmese state-centred view, for example, was that the Chinese were subjects of the Empire of China, with a single and united political identity. This view holds that the Chinese were a single people, called "Tayoub" by the Burmese, or at least could be identified as such. This perspective is to be found in texts composed in the Burmese court or based upon Burmese royal court records. One reason for the Burmese state-centred perspective of the Chinese as one group, is that the Burmese court probably saw identities in terms of political relationships.

These relationships were reflected in several ways. First, the subjects of the Chinese empire were all Chinese in the same way that the direct subjects of the Burman court were Burman and all the subjects of the Talaing court were Talaing (Lieberman 1978). Second, the Burmese court and its ministers were regularly visited by Chinese embassies and, in wartime, Burmese warriors and commanders fought Chinese armies and commanders. All Chinese state relations with Burma were overland, between

³The longstanding importance of the tribute-system gave the Burmese and Chinese an intimacy that Europeans lacked in their relationships with the Burmese court during a later period. When Michael Symes visited the Burmese court in 1795, a Chinese imperial mission had arrived in that court on the same day and was told by the Burmese that their relationship with the Chinese was much more cordial than that with the English. Symes also noted that some Burmese officials could converse with the Chinese envoys in Chinese (Symes 1800).

Yunnan and northeastern Burma, the same quarter that saw all of the warfare between the Chinese Empire and the Kingdom of Burma. Hence, the Burmese saw the Chinese as an inland people and not a people who would come by sea. Some Chinese in royal Burma, for example, were war captives who were deported away from the Chinese border to the southern coast. This was in converse to the arrangement of Western captives who were typically deported away from the coasts, far into the interior (in a manner similar to the Roman policy of stationing legionnaires at posts far away from their home provinces). Although it is unclear in which campaign they were taken, many of the Chinese in Rangoon at the time of the outbreak of the Anglo-Burmese War appear to have been war captive deportees, being placed at Rangoon "to work, and to increase the population" (Maw 1832, 88). This also suggests a Burmese view of Chinese as an overland, not an overseas people. Additionally, after the mid-fifteenth century, Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia were often in disregard of the ban on going overseas and hence ignored by the Chinese empire as illegals.

For the precolonial period, Burmese historiography has been dependent upon the state-centred historical perspective. The available Burmese accounts are also generally court-centred, consisting of royal chronicles based upon materials in royal libraries, royal orders (*amein-daw*), local official reports (*sittans*), and, although numerous, records of commercial transactions (*thekkarits*), are very limited in scope and time. These documents and historical narratives focus almost exclusively, in regard to the Chinese, upon state relations. Furthermore, Burmese-language histories prior to the twentieth century rarely shed light on the activities of Chinese migrants in Burma, indicating a general absence of interest in Chinese migrants themselves (save only for when they were involved in events related to state activities). These materials thus shed little light on any Chinese migrant activities in Burma aside from those involving the Burmese state. This Burmese court perspective on the Chinese of both Lower and Upper Burma, both local and non-local, as forming one "Tayoub" or "Chinese" group has also had a great impact on colonial and post-colonial historiography as historians of Burma have depended upon these written materials as important indigenous sources.

Likewise, in the Burmese sources, Burma's relationship with China dictated the coverage of Chinese ethnic and migrant activities in Burma. In Burmese chronicles, for

example, at least those written before the twentieth century, the Chinese were included in the state-centred historical narratives only when the state of China was involved. In the eighteenth century, we are told, the problems of one Chinese merchant on the Burmese Chinese border led to a Chinese invasion. Little information is available at all, however, for the Chinese active in Lower Burma, at least until the 1820s. Similarly, other Burmese texts on the Burmese and Chinese relationship were authored by Burmese court ministers unable to escape from the state-centred perspective. The minister who composed the Tayoub-than Yauk Mawgun in the early nineteenth century, for example, chiefly examined the arrivals of Chinese embassies at the Burmese court, not the range of Chinese migrant activities in Burma.

II

The Early Colonial Perspective

In the early days of British interaction with Burma, just prior to the extension of British rule to two of Burma's maritime provinces (Arakan and Tenasserim) in 1826, the British also viewed the Chinese in Burma as representatives of Chinese trade and economic connectivities in Upper Burma. British accounts of the Chinese in Burma in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were chiefly concerned with the role of Chinese merchants in Burma, their imports and exports, and how they carried out the trade (Gouger [1826]: 222). Michael Symes in 1795 (Symes 1800) and Hiram Cox in 1800 (Cox 1821) may have disagreed on the nature of the Burmese court, but they agreed on the rich potential of Burmese overland trade connections with China. These and later accounts by Henry Gouger (1826) and John Laird (1926) created an early basis for the British framing of the Chinese relationship with Burma.

These accounts chiefly sought to answer the most important questions of British company's and officials: what products did the Chinese buy and sell, how frequently, how many merchants were involved, what routes did they take, and, implicitly, how could one tap this resource and gain access to the inland western China market? The interrogation of the Henry Gouger before Henry Crawford at the close of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), for example, reveals John Crawford's (and that of Company authorities)

deep and almost exclusive interest in the intermediary merchant role played by the Chinese in the Yunnan border, not in the Lower Burma. For Crawford and others, this was the much envied "inland trade" of Burma with China. As with Gouger, John Laird was also asked about Burma's trade with China: "Do you know any thing of the trade carried on between the northern parts of the Burman dominions and China?" (Laird [1826]: 226). Although some British surveys of Upper Burma's trade during 1826 also provided additional information on the activities of Chinese living in Upper Burma, this information also focused exclusively upon their commercial activities.⁴

Despite preceding and later trends, British documents on Tenasserim in the latter part of the 1820s reveal a view of the local Chinese of Lower Burma as being divided into tribes, much as the British perceived Chinese communities in the Straits.⁵ It is probably the case that the early British colonial perceptions of different Chinese "tribes" in Tenasserim came from the Chinese migrants themselves. Many of these migrants played with different identities: relying on Gwangdong, Hokkien, Teochew, or other sub-Chinese identities among other Chinese while portraying themselves as Chinese to Europeans and others. If this was the case, however, why did British perceptions change over the course of the nineteenth century, very noticeably from the 1830s?⁶

⁴ Gouger's and Laird's image of the Chinese trader was as a small merchant, one of only hundreds, who came in the yearly caravan "on man to about thirty horses, or mules" (Gouger [1826], p. 223; Laird [1826: 227]). These caravans took about two months to travel from China to Ava (Laird [1826]: 227).

⁵ The British view of the Chinese in the Straits tended to reflect more of a local perspective toward the Chinese in the area. The censuses for Chinese in the Straits Settlements, including Penang, Singapore, Melaka, and Province Wellesley, for example, always included a major chart breaking up the Chinese into different Chinese "tribes." These tribes also included the "Baba Chinese," referring to the children of Chinese who had intermarried with Malays. First-hand accounts also reveal the critical place of Chinese dialect divisions in external perceptions of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements. These perceptions pervade the contemporaneous documents, from the Straits Settlements Records to the Hearings in 1867 regarding the Penang Riots of the same year, and beyond.⁵ These were not the simple observations of foreigners who mistook what they saw. The well-known 1848 account of the Chinese in Singapore, provided as answers to questions by Siah U Chin, for example, indicated the same kinds of divisions, also referred to the Chinese groups as "tribes." After referring to six chief "tribes," including the Hokkien, the Baba, the Teochew, the Gwangdong, the Khe, and the Hainanese, he explains, "[e]ach individual tribe speaks the dialect of that tribe" (p. 283).

⁶ Differences between colonial perspectives on the Chinese in Burma between the 1820s and early 1840s cannot be explained by the existence of different colonial administrative groups. The British occupied Tenasserim in 1824 and formally annexed it in 1826. Although the Straits Settlements were originally placed under the authority of Calcutta and the new British acquisitions in Burma were placed in turn under the Straits Settlements, British colonial officials assigned to Burma were not chiefly drawn, as might be assumed, from British administrators and officers from India. Until 1843, the principal colonial administrators in Tenasserim were drawn from a generation of British colonial officials who had cut their teeth in Penang in the context of Straits Settlements society. This first generation of colonial administrators

British perspectives of the Chinese in Burma adjusted to the need for Chinese settlement in British Tenasserim. In the 1820s and early 1830s, British views of the Chinese in Tenasserim were influenced more heavily by local economic concerns. With low population reserves, its landscape historically ravaged by war, and an economy poorly suited for growing world markets, the British actually considered giving Tenasserim back to the Burmese. Certainly, this economic context had an influence on British perceptions of the Chinese in the area. Colonial documents and perspectives, for example, played with the presence of Chinese in Tenasserim, sometimes admitting they were there, and other times pretending or imagining that the Chinese were not already there (Charney 1999).

At first, it also looked like new developments involving Chinese migrants in Burma would help the development of a strong economy in British-held areas of Lower Burma. For many Chinese, particularly the Chinese of Penang, for example, the extension of British control into Lower Burma during the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) represented an unprecedented economic opportunity. At issue were the old Burmese royal restrictions on trade, and British regiments occupying Rangoon and other key Lower Burmese towns opened up new trade possibilities. Most of the immediate opportunities, however, were directly linked to the British regiments themselves. British soldiers, unused to life in Burma, were good customers for familiar foods and wares. After the British had occupied Rangoon for some time (circa 1825), Captain F. B. Doveton recalled:

" . . . a most refreshing cup of tea and a most delicious piece of bread fell to my share. This luxury had just been introduced into Rangoon, through the agency of some enterprising Chinese, if I remember rightly, to whom, by the way, we were indebted for many of the supplies and comforts that latterly flowed in upon us so abundantly. Some thousands of Chinese were, after a time, located in the town, having come mostly from Penang. These brought over with them, in their junks, pigs, poultry, vegetables and

likely carried their impressions of the Chinese in the Straits into Tenasserim in the early decades of British administration. After 1843, the chief British colonial officials in Tenasserim were drawn from the Bengal military and civil establishments.

tea and sugar, in abundance. the pork-butchers in particular, carried on a most flourishing trade, there being ever a great demand for pork chops and sausages; and many of these gentry, doubtless, amassed considerable sums, as they well deserved, by their industry and enterprise, in the exercise of which attributes, as far at least as relates to commerce, the Chinese have no superiors" (Doveton, 1852, pp. 227-228).

This episode bode well for the activities of the Chinese of Penang in Lower Burma, especially in Rangoon. It was to be a short-lived development, however, as the British withdrew from the Lower Burma delta at the close of the First Anglo-Burmese War and Burmese royal rule was re-extended over Rangoon and other coastal towns.

It also appeared that Tenasserim would benefit from problems for the Chinese in Rangoon, brought about by the return of Burmese rule to central Lower Burma after the Treaty of Yandabo (1826). The Burmese who returned after the British withdrawal took out their anger on the Chinese for several reasons. First, when the Burmese had first evacuated the city, some Chinese in the city had engaged in looting and hoarding: "[The Chinese there] were amongst the greatest rogues in existence. Plunder being prohibited to the British forces, the Chinese carried off every thing in the Burmans' absence. Their houses were full of all kinds of commodities, and I believe they were the only people who had abundance" (Maw 1832, 88-89). Second, the Chinese had carried on business as usual when Mon rebels briefly held the town after the British had evacuated. Those Chinese who remained when the Burmese won back the city did not fare well:

"[A]mong the prisoners there were some Chinese, who were sold by the captors on the spot to the highest bidder. These had not served the Talains [Mons] nor were they taken in arms. They had not, however, quitted the suburbs where their dwellings were, when the Burmans returned to the stockade, which was considered suspicious, and thus, was an offence which merited punishment" (Crawfurd 1834, 2.41).

Even then, the Mon rebellion had left Tatgale in ruins (Crawford 1834, 2.39).⁷ Indeed, in these circumstances, many Chinese migrants in Lower Burma did flee to neighbouring British-held areas such as Tenasserim.

Further, British rule was extended to Tenasserim at a time when economic growth in the Straits spurred the large-scale immigration of Southeastern Chinese and this migration pushed northward into Burma. The 1820s and 1830s saw especially large (but not the first) Southeastern Chinese migrations out of Fujian and Gwangdong and into the Straits of Melaka. What I have found in my research, looking at local historical narratives and local perspectives is that there was a continuity of Chinese migration from Southeast China around the Straits and into Lower Burma. Coastal Burma and the Straits thus formed a single zone for the Chinese themselves. A detailed examination of the contemporaneous sources, for example, indicates that this migration pushed further north from the Straits of Melaka into Southeastern Burma and reached Bassein by the mid-1820s (Anonymous 1827a, xlv), just as sustained Burman southern migration moved into the same area. Chinese immigration into Burma was part of overall Chinese immigration into the Straits of Melaka in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The flow of Chinese migrants into Lower Burma from the Straits, helped to dramatically increase the presence of specifically Southeastern Chinese. By the 1830s, Chinese merchants had settled as far up the coast as Akyab in western Burma (Malcom 1840, 118; Spry 1841, p. 144). As one observer noted in 1901:

The Chinese used to come to Bamaw from Yunnan by way of Momeit, which was the route followed both by trade and by invading armies, at the terminus of which Chinese have been settled for long. But they have not spread in Burma from that centre. The peaceable invasion of Chinese comes by way of Canton [Gwangdong], Singapore, and the Burmese ports (Ferrars 1901, 156).⁸

⁷ As late as 1833, Tatgale had still not recovered. Ultimately, a fire in 27 March 1842 destroyed what remained of the Chinese quarter in Tatgale (Pearn 1939, 133, 156).

⁸ The earlier years of this "peaceable invasion" by the Overseas Chinese into Lower Burma (as opposed to the Overland Chinese in Upper Burma) and its role in the emergence of the 'Chinese of Burma'

Teochew, Hokkien, Gwangdong, Hakka, and other migrant groups settled throughout this zone, comprising coastal Burma and the coastal lands of the Straits. Throughout the Straits and coastal Burma, Chinese merchants, city laborers, tin-miners and others organized around clan and dialect associations. Often these Chinese migrants would move around freely throughout this zone during their lifetimes, so that one Chinese migrant might spend part of his life in Singapore, then part of his life in Rangoon, and ultimately spend the remainder of his life in Penang. Most Chinese families in Rangoon, for example, had some family relationship with Chinese in Penang, just as in the familiar cases of Penang and Singapore's family interrelationships. It was even considered at one time that British Burma and the Straits should together form one British colony, given their similarities, but this was not to be the case (Rangoon Gazette).

The early British administrators used the Chinese communities in Tenasserim in two ways. (1) *On the one hand, De Maingy and others kept up hopes that Tenasserim would be prosperous once Chinese immigration into the area had begun.* British documents from Tenasserim during this period, especially those lamenting Tenasserim's poor economic performance, for example, suggest that the arrival of Chinese in Tenasserim was either begun under British rule, would eventually begin under British rule, or was as yet insufficient to keep the economy going.⁹ This is in sharp contrast, however, to the non-British sources (and even some British ones) that indicate a long-term and significant Chinese role in Tenasserim's maritime economy.¹⁰ (2) *On the other*

has only recently begun to be given greater consideration in the literature (Charney 1999a; Charney 1999b; Charney 2000b).

⁹ In 1826, for example, Maingy wrote to the Governor of Prince of Wales Island explaining why he had failed to begin exporting significant supplies of tin: "My expectations respecting the produce of the Tin Mines have not been realized owing to the want of Chinese laborers, and the few that have been employed, having suffered from Fever are unwilling to return to the Mines until the setting in of the N.E. Monsoon" (p. 43).

¹⁰ In a recent article (Charney 2001b), I discussed the Cochin-Chinese embassy of 1821-1822 to Burma that was sent by a provincial Vietnamese governor who hoped to gain access to Tenasserim's esculent birds' nests so that he could sell them in China where they were in high demand and he would make a great profit. Nothing came of the mission, aside from a few exchanges back and forth between Burma and Vietnam. Certainly, nothing was resolved by 1824 when a follow-up Vietnamese mission was given a free ride to Rangoon aboard British warships on their way to invade Lower Burma. This episode is important to us here because the return mission to Vietnam in 1822 included, in addition to Burmese ministers, a British *shahbandar* of Rangoon, in Burmese employ, and a Chinese merchant of Penang who controlled the Tenasserim esculent birds' nest farm in the name of the King of Burma. In the contemporary

hand, and in contradictory fashion, these same British colonial officials blamed the Chinese for all their failures in Tenasserim during the same period. At the same time that British administrators pointed to the absence of Chinese in Tenasserim, some British officials, and sometimes the same officials, blamed Tenasserim's problems on a Chinese community that suddenly did exist in Tenasserim. In other words, when the British were focused upon Tenasserim itself, in this case in the hopes of developing Tenasserim's colonial economy, they stressed the local context, in which case the Chinese were a convenient scapegoat for the failures of these same colonial officials.¹¹ Even when evidence of Chinese syndicates was not available, Maingy still found ways to point his finger directly at the Chinese for the economic failures of the colony.¹²

Burmese, Vietnamese and British documents of this event, the British documents emphasize the supposedly pivotal role played by the Englishman, but make no reference at all to the presence of the Chinese merchant. The Burmese and the Vietnamese documents, however, do mention this Chinese merchant and the Burmese sources explicitly state that he was Chinese. Similarly, the Burmese and Vietnamese accounts make no mention of the Englishman. Thus, for unclear reasons, the British ignored the intermediary role of the Chinese in the Burmese and Vietnamese relationship, by contrast to indigenous sources. But this episode is also important because it indicates a phenomenon that is gradually being re-pieced together from indigenous and some European sources: the Chinese, especially those with connections to Penang, were playing a critical role in the Southeastern Burmese economy long before, and during, the opening years of British rule in Tenasserim. Ultimately, some of the early monopolies farmed out in Tavoy (such as those for opium and gambling) were sometimes taken over under the colonial state's direct management due to the disagreements between Maingy and the Chinese of Tavoy (Maingy 1826a, p. 37, Maingy 1826c, p. 40, Maingy 1826d, p. 43).

¹¹ Maingy, for example, focused attention on local Chinese in the context of the sale of the birds' nest, opium, and gambling farms. Maingy spread the word that the local Chinese had grouped together in order to drive down prices and improve the terms of sale. Maingy, of course, adopted various strategies to improve the British position in these sales and the management of the farms but generally failed (Maingy 1825b, p. 28; Maingy 1826a, p. 37). As Maingy explained in 1826: "I regret to report that the same combination that prevailed among the Chinese farmers during your stay here has continued and that I have found it impossible to rent the farms upon the system you directed to be pursued that of dividing each farm into a certain number of shares and licenses. Several attempts have been made to dispose of the two that remain unsold but not a bidder for them was to be found excepting at rates I would not listen to. . . . Lieutenant Briggs states the combination among the Chinese at Mergui as being even greater than it is here . . . [T]he Propensity to combination, exclusion of others and spirit of monopoly which characterizes the Chinese must therefore be guarded against at the outset, and it would certainly be adviseable that the great proportion of workers at the mines should consist of our Burmese inhabitants[,] the temporary employment of Chinese workmen as the most ready and expert might indeed be convenient at present [,] but Temporary convenience would be dearly purchased in the certain result that we must ever after depend on expensive foreign labour instead of the cheaper work of our own natural subject" (Maingy 1826a, p. 37-38).

¹² As Maingy reported in 1833: "One cause of this failure is, I think, [is] to be attributed to the circumstances of none but poor and insolvent Chinese having hitherto engaged in working the tin mines " (Maingy 1833, p. 104).

There is a connection between the importance of the locality and locally relevant historical narratives and perspectives for the British during this period and their perceptions of the local Chinese in Burma. The British shifted between local and non-local perspectives when it suited their economic interests and, in reference to the Chinese in Tenasserim, British colonial officials moved back and forth between silence and finger-pointing when it was convenient to do so. Whether there or not, in the minds of British colonial administrators in Tenasserim, the Chinese were seen as the key to a potential economic miracle in Tenasserim or as a scapegoat for colonial failures. With lenses focussed upon the Chinese communities in coastal Burma, at least during this moment, their heterogeneity became visible to colonial officials as the local narrative became relevant to the state-centred one.

British accounts of the Chinese in Tenasserim during this period sound strangely like British documents on the Chinese in Penang and Singapore. In Maingy's report of 22 October 1825, for example, he explained that he had postponed selling off the esculent bird's nest farm in the Tavoy islands out of suspicion of the eagerness of the Gwangdong Chinese from Rangoon to buy it, apparently having some reason to distrust the Gwangdong over other Chinese "tribes." Maingy, of course, referred to them, as did British colonial administrators of the period in the Straits, not as Gwangdong but as Macao Chinese (p. 29). Part of the reason may have been that Maingy wanted to avoid inter-group conflict between the Chinese so early in his administration of the province, even before political stability or economic viability had been assured. As Maingy explained, regarding the farm for esculent bird's nests in the Tavoy islands and the Mergui islands: "It has been the custom not to dispose of the farms separately and the Chinese here, being all of the same tribe, no competition for them has taken place . . ." (p. 28). Apparently, all were of the same "tribe" the Chinese in this case were probably Hokkien, one of the two chief Chinese dialect groups in Lower Burma, as suggested by Maingy's fear that selling one farm to the Gwangdung would have stirred things up. Maingy also hints here how relevant dialect groups were for colonial administrators concerned with Tenasserim *per se*, as both the functioning of the farms and keeping domestic peace required taking into account dialect affiliations and treating such matters with delicacy.

In short, after the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), British colonial administrators were saddled with a large colony of little clear economic value that was only important for strategic reasons. Being unprofitable, the British were concerned that it would be an excessive drain on their resources. For some time, the British seriously considered giving Tenasserim back to the Burmese or giving it to Thailand. Thus, economically, the British were specifically interested for several years solely in making the colony self-sufficient. As a result, local colonial officials in Tenasserim were chiefly concerned with the locality. In this context, divisions among the Chinese became very visible to colonial officials because these divisions had a very important impact on the colonial state's prospects for building Tenasserim's economy. Thus, for this period, the local narrative was emphasized in British documents.

In the 1830s, British perceptions of the Chinese began to change again. In the face of Tenasserim's poor economic outlook, an idea gradually emerged in the minds of the British administrators of Lower Burma that Southwest China was their saving economic connection for their new Province of Tenasserim. Since, as I have mentioned, early British attempts to develop the economy failed, in the 1830s, a series of missions were sponsored to help link up the colony with Chinese caravan trade coming out of Yunnan. The first of these exploratory missions was that of a certain Dr. Richardson who made two long journeys from Moulmein, one in 1829-1830 and another in 1834, up to the Shan states in the hopes of contacting Chinese caravans moving through the area and attempting to divert them in the future to Tenasserim.¹³ The missions did not become important enough to publicize until Second British Commissioner for Tenasserim, Edmund Augustus Blundell, had the diaries and journals from Richardson's journeys published in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1836. Even then, however, they had not yet been a success.¹⁴ It should be stressed that at this time, exploiting resources from or expanding into the areas visited by Richardson north of

¹³ Richardson related his sentiments in his diary made en route in early 1830: "A Chinese who is here . . . is to start to-morrow for Zimmay, to bring up some of the principal Chinese traders said to have arrived there, and I have strong hopes, from the enterprizing character of the Chinese, they may induced to visit the [Tenasserim] coast" (p. 619).

¹⁴ As Blundell explained, in 1836: "It is expected that a portion of this caravan will this year extend their journey to Maulamyne, and hopes are entertained that this will lead to annual visits in increasing numbers, and the opening of an important overland trade between China and our possessions on the Tenasserim coast " (p. 604).

Tenasserim were not important for local British administrators.¹⁵ What was important, was how to get commerce going between Chinese markets and Tenasserim and thus stimulate economic growth. A small number of Chinese merchants from the north did travel to Tenasserim in 1836 which helped to convince the British that they needed to redouble their efforts. Thus, in 1836-37, another mission was sent out, this time under Lieutenant T. E. MacLeod, Assistant Commissioner of the Tenasserim Provinces. Unlike Richardson's missions, MacLeod pushed up past the Shan states and up to the border of the Kingdom of Burma with China.¹⁶

From this point on, British colonial perceptions of the Chinese in Burma and the Straits underwent a slow but dramatic bifurcation. While British colonial officials in Penang and Singapore continued to stress fragmented Chinese communities in their colonies, British colonial officials in Burma moved away from early discourse on the fragmented Chinese tribes of Lower Burma. In part this was because the British administrators in Tenasserim were now looking for a non-local solution to Tenasserim's economic problem and their attention moved away from local perspectives. As their view broadened, their attention no longer concentrated on the internal divisions of the Chinese in Tenasserim, who, in British colonial eyes, had together failed to save Tenasserim economically, and instead British colonial officials focused on developing connections that linked China and its markets to Tenasserim. There was thus a strong incentive to see local Chinese in an overall "Chinese" context.

Early British historiography on Burma was strongly committed to Chinese-Burmese relations to the neglect of other aspects of Burmese history. The interest here is unmistakable as no full-fledged British historiography on Burma emerged until the 1860s, with the publication of Arthur Phayre's historical surveys, which together formed the basis for his classic 1889 study. Henry Burney, for example, translated large extracts from the Burmese royal chronicles that dealt with the history of China-Burma relations,

¹⁵ Blundell's comments imply a lack of any interest in the area between China and Tenasserim itself on the part of the colonial administration of Tenasserim: [quote] [t]he trade of the country [visited by Richardson] is unimportant." (p. 604).

¹⁶ MacLeod excitedly reported the prospects of opening up increased trade: "These [Chinese] merchants informed me that they were most anxious to carry on a brisk trade with our provinces, and that the market was most satisfactory, but that the road travelled by those who visited us in 1836 was such as to render it impracticable for them to come visit by it. This objection I am happy to say can be easily overcome by their taking the road travelled by me on my return here from Zumue." (p. 992).

and these were published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century. British perceptions of and historiography on the Chinese in Burma, then, was at first a continuation, or better put, paralleled that of the Burman court. Just as Burma's state documentation and royally-sponsored chronicles focused on state relations between Burma and China, British state documentation and historiography on the Chinese in Burma focused on their single national identity due to considerations of the importance of China in the interests of British Burma.

Colonial historiography on Burma has thus tended to view Chinese migration into Burma as emanating from the northeast, out of Yunnan, and has portrayed Chinese migrants there as forming a homogenous "Chinese" ethnic group. This view is to be found in Arthur Phayre (1883), G.E. Harvey (1925), and even the revisionist Burmese historian Maung Htin Aung (1967). Furthermore, this view has found continuity in postwar historiography, which has done little to challenge these colonial impressions. In British historiography on Burma as well, the Chinese appear only in Burmese history as vanguards of Chinese expansion. I would suggest that the central importance of trade with China in the minds of nineteenth century British administrators in Burma influenced their focus on the Chinese in Upper Burma in their historical narratives, to the total exclusion of Chinese in Lower Burma.

III

The Middle Colonial Perspective

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the British wanted to establish a base from which to exploit the trade potential of western China. This was built upon what Warren Walsh (1943) calls the "Yunnan Myth," beginning in the 1860s. According to this myth, which in the course of four decades, came to encompass four other Southwest Chinese provinces in addition to Yunnan, Southwest China was a region of immense wealth only waiting to be exploited by the British or the French, pushing north out of Burma and Indochina respectively. After serious exploration during this period, by the end of the nineteenth century, however, this myth was revealed as such. This myth strongly influenced local British and French colonial officials.

It should be noted as well, that this *transition* in British policy also followed the British acquisition of the remainder of Lower Burma in 1852 as a result of the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852-1853). British attention to Burma and within Burma shifted away from Tenasserim specifically and focused more upon the Irrawaddy Deltaic portion of Lower Burma surrounding Rangoon. Lower Burma became relevant to broader British colonial interests in part as a potential conduit for opening up Yunnan to British commercial penetration. The view was strengthened although not caused by the fact that the upper levels of the colonial administration in Burma had, from the 1840s, shifted away from administrators with experience in the Straits Settlements to administrative officers who had spent earlier careers in Bengal, as I have mentioned earlier in this paper. The perception of China in India had from a much earlier date, been different than it was viewed in Tenasserim. For one thing, British possessions in India did not depend upon bringing caravans down to connect it to China. For another thing, the British in India had from an earlier date considered gaining an outlet for Indian goods in China through Yunnan.¹⁷ This hope was actually of very old duration for the British colonial administration in Bengal. Earlier surveys with this development in mind had already taken place.¹⁸ It should be noted that in the most of these accounts, and in the two examples just mentioned of British interest in connecting India to China through Burma, no reference to Tenasserim was made, and there was also no reference to any Chinese migrants resident in coastal Burma.

In any event, the Yunnan myth was important for overall British policy regarding China in the late nineteenth century, but it was pivotal for British perceptions of the Chinese community in Burma. The emergence of large-scale rice exports via maritime routes from the 1850s produced a boom economy in British Burma that should have shifted British attention away from the Chinese caravans coming out of Yunnan. Due to the Yunnan myth, however, British interest in Burma's overland connections with

¹⁷ As Dr. C. Williams explained in his 1864 "Memorandum on the Question of British Trade with Western China via Burma," [Quote] At the time of first turning my thoughts to a career in Burmah, and especially in Upper Burmah, one of the prospects most distinctly in my view, was that of the old route to China by the Irrawaddy being re-opened and made available to British commerce . . . [Unquote] (p. 407).

¹⁸ These included the 1848 exploratory mission sent out of Calcutta to Yunnan with the intention of: [Quote] showing the great commercial and political importance of the Burmese town of Bhanmo, on the Upper Irrawady, and the practicability of a direct trade overland between Calcutta and China. [unquote].

Southwestern China was rekindled. Thus, the focus of British colonial interests in Lower Burma upon China continued throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

As far as the British in Burma were concerned, the transition from (1) the focus on bringing Chinese caravans down to Tenasserim to (2) the goal of gaining access to Yunnan for the sake of exploiting Yunnan's local resources can be dated to the early 1860s, and one of the first major policy statements on the subject was Dr. C. Williams' 1864 Memorandum. As a result, for nearly seventy years, from the very beginning of British interest in bringing Chinese caravans to Tenasserim from the 1830s, up through the evolution of the Yunnan Myth, and up until the beginning of the twentieth century, the British remained uninterested in local perceptions, either identities or identifications of Chinese settlers in Lower Burma.

It was only when the British were interested in using the Chinese of Lower Burma to fit into overall British economic strategies regarding China that attention was refocused upon Chinese migrants in Burma. In this case, however, the Chinese in Burma were, in fact, considered as one Chinese people and sub-divisions were ignored either as unimportant or incompatible with British economic interests in Southwestern China. When the Chinese became critical to colonial economic interests, then they did enter the state-centred historical narrative, but not as a heterogeneous and local community, instead as a singular community connected to China. As Edward Said has explained, Europeans essentialized Asia, ordering knowledge in ways that suited their own interests. But, as I have tried to indicate, there was just not one "essentialized" Chinese identification. Rather different colonial representations of the "Chinese" co-existed, interacted, and, most importantly, contradicted each other at different times in different contexts. Did British identifications and essentializing of the Chinese, in the present case, change in tandem with shifting British economic interests in the region, or in relation to developments within China that affected British economic interests? As I have tried to explain, I think they did.¹⁹

¹⁹ But the British also played with identifications of China itself. As R. F. Johnston noted in 1908: [Quote] . . . China is, indeed, rapidly growing to be more than a mere geographical term. The racial solidarity that is the underlying cause of her wonderful power of passive resistance shows no signs of disintegration at the present time, and it will form the best possible foundation for a new national patriotism. Only ten years ago [c. 1898] an English traveller and politician, predicting the partition of China, explained that he used the word 'China' only for convenience, for there is really no such thing as

Edward H. Parker worked from the opposite direction as Burney had, analyzing Chinese materials for what they had to say about the China-Burma relationship. His work, Burma With Special Reference to Her Relations to China (1893), came out a decade after the publication of Phayre's *magnum opus*, The History of Burma (1883). Parker summarized and ordered information from Chinese texts on Chinese relations with Burma. It became almost a handbook for British officials and historians interested in Burma and it, or a *precis* on Chinese-Burmese relations (Parker, n. d.), also composed by Parker, is cited in the bibliographies of all significant histories of Burma until the present as *the* standard reference for the history of the Chinese in Burma (Harvey 1925, 383). Relying upon the Chinese state-centred perspective affirmed perspectives developing within the ranks of British colonial authorities in Burma. But regarding the local Chinese community in Burma itself, there was little British interest.

III

Late Colonial Perspectives

As British Burma entered the twentieth century, prevailing state-centred perspectives were contested by popular impressions of the Chinese in Burma and the Chinese. These perceptions appear to have been there from the beginning, but as local histories tend to be integrated into state-centred narratives only when they are relevant to the state, they remained local and unnoticed by colonial authorities. There are a number of reasons why this change should have occurred. First, the Chinese population in Burma increased dramatically from the 1890s to the 1930s and their importance in commercial activities and their urban concentration, especially in Rangoon and Mandalay, made them much more visible to the British and to growing numbers of Burmese. Second, the Chinese migrant population had achieved the critical mass necessary to launch Chinese language newspapers, form larger numbers of associations and clubs, and to participate in the print literature of the region. Taw Sein Ko, for example, became a contributor to the new Overseas Chinese journal, the Straits Chinese Magazine. Chinese merchants came

'China at all.'" For such a view there was some excuse at a time when humbled China was lying wounded and helpless at the feet of victorious Japan, but few, I fancy, will be inclined to endorse it now" [unquote].

to dominate opium monopolies and thus became not only key figures in public proceedings such as the Opium Commission Hearings of the 1890s, but also became, when many attempted to circumvent opium monopoly limits on distribution, almost the weekly subject of newspaper reports on crime among the "Chinese." In both situations, their dialect associations were noted and published. The Chinese were, in fact, become more real, diverse, and, above all, local.

As a result, a tension in British historiography on Burma in the late colonial period emerged. This tension was between those scholars who continued to view the Chinese as foreigners, temporary sojourners, much like the British colonials themselves, and those who saw the Chinese as local actors in Burmese history. The former view was certainly reflected early twentieth century British historiography on Burma. The best example is the colonial historian B. R. Pearn's magnum opus, the History of Rangoon, which is so detailed and large that it has been frequently treated as a primary source by historians of Southeast Asia. Despite the incredible importance of Chinese merchants and Chinatown in the history of Rangoon, there are only two brief references to anything Chinese in Rangoon in the volume. Although important in local narratives, and Pearn was writing not from the perspective of Rangoon, but rather from the British colonial perspective on the place of Rangoon in Burma, the Chinese in Rangoon per se appear to have been considered as irrelevant to the overall state-centred historical narrative.

At the same time, the other trend involved in the former view, was to emphasize the historical relationship between the Burmese and Chinese courts. The Chinese invasion of Burma in the late thirteenth century has probably received more attention in the late colonial historiography than any other single event involving the Chinese in Burma, at least for the pre-1940 period (For this literature see Huber 1909, 648-655, 659-680). The significance of this invasion and what role it may or may not have played in the decline and ultimate demise of the Pagan kingdom is still a matter of debate (Aung-Thwin 1998), although it is best seen as one (and an external one at that) of a number of factors that together were at fault. A second area of chief interest regarding the Chinese in Burma is for a series of four Chinese invasions of Upper Burma in the eighteenth century, all of which were beaten by Burmese armies (Luce 1925; Barretto 1930b; Lieberman 1986: 224, 226-7, 247, 269).

The latter view was slow in emerging, but crept into historical narratives through a variety of mediums. British newspapers in Rangoon, such as the Rangoon Gazette, introduced many Burmese and British settlers to the active efforts of local Chinese to support their communities, and these communities were clearly divided along dialect lines.²⁰ Attention to the Chinese in Burma as a local community was also reinforced by British travelogues of the 1920s and 1930s, even earlier, by authors of wide experience in other areas of Southeast Asia, especially the Straits.

More importantly, as the Chinese communities in Burma grew, prospered, and became more sedentary, the self-promotion of special cultural activities, the construction of community-specific temples, and the establishment of dialect associations made more obvious what I see the "Chinese internal view" of themselves. Dialects, as opposed to standard Mandarin, remained dominant; even the leading Sino-Burmese colonial administrator of the late nineteenth century, Taw Sein Ko, had to be sent at government expense to Peking to learn Mandarin. And Chinese nationalists came to Burma to promote their cause of a unified Chinese Republic and a single Chinese national they were met solely by their dialect counterparts in Rangoon. This internal view has been long-term among the Chinese in Burma, as I found in my some of my interviews with Chinese in Rangoon and Mandalay in the last two years.²¹ Oral interviews suggested that the Chinese in Rangoon see themselves, both in the present and in the past, in ways similar to those of Chinese communities in Penang and Singapore, divided into associations and with diverse origins in Southeastern China and, among the Chinese in Rangoon, with few connections to the Chinese from Yunnan. The center of Chinatown, for example, is still essentially divided into two blocks, the Gwangdong and the Hokkien sides of the street. Dialect associations still form the basic centers for community functions, and, aside from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, no blanket Chinese organization exists for Chinese community-wide activities or interaction.²² According to

²⁰ Rangoon's "Chinatown" was then, as it is today, split into Gwangdong and Hokkien blocks.

²¹ The author conducted fieldwork in Burma in May 1999, January 2000, and December 2000. At the time of this writing, the author is preparing for another fieldtrip to Burma in July 2001.

²² Two other recent explorations of Chinese society in Burma, for example, have found that the oral histories of the Chinese in Burma and their present-day perspectives are very similar to those prevalent among the Chinese in the Straits. Mya Than, in an article on the Chinese in 1990s Burma published in 1997, has offered the first publication as far as I am aware that has identified differences in Chinese identities and identifications of Burma as highly relevant aspects of the Chinese community in Rangoon

one septagenerian Chinese resident who had lived his entire life in Burma, prior to the Second World War, the Chinese in Rangoon, who had no problems intermarrying with Burmans, Karens, and Mons, would not even marry across dialect lines among the Chinese.²³ Despite the longevity of this Chinese internal view, its existence has really only entered into the historiography in the last five years or so. We do know that despite developments that promoted a national Chinese identity overseas since the 1910s, including the Chinese Revolution, the Second World War, the establishment of the PRC and the Cultural Revolution, this internal view remains strong among the Chinese in Burma even today.

This perspective of the varied Chinese communities, instead of a single Chinese national identity, also emerges in the Burmese local-centred narrative. The average Burmese did not come into contact with Chinese embassies or even Chinese armies on a regular basis. Few Burmese likely ever went to any major Chinese city prior to the nineteenth century. At the same time, many average Burmese lived on a daily basis in the proximity of Chinese communities, interacted with them, and did notice that Chinese were not a uniform group, nor did they form a single identity. Unlike the state-centred narrative then, local narratives and popular impressions saw a much more heterogeneous Chinese population. We know, for example, that locally-derived information from the early seventeenth century that was then incorporated into some of the state-centred narratives, identified certain groups from China by non-Chinese identifications, such as in the late sixteenth century information that slipped out of Toungoo about the situation of Muslim Panthee traders and was included in U Kala's early eighteenth century Maha Yazawin-Kyi (Kala 1730). Aside from such written evidence, popular oral traditions divided the Chinese of Burma into different groups. However, these distinctions do not appear to be consciously sub-ethnic. Rather, Burmese popular traditions saw two chief

and both their external and internal identities and identifications. But his purpose in the article was to discuss the economic role and contemporary data regarding the Chinese in Burma and not to interrogate these identities and identifications, discuss their origins, or put them into a broader and dynamic historical context. Jocelyn Co Thein (1997) has also found similar divisions in her research in the same community. However, as her work is focused upon the 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon and this Chinese community in the 1980s and 1990s, her interests have been focused on contemporary continuities rather than historiographical differences. She has also found some of the same divisions in the Chinese community there today.

²³ Other evidence suggests that this was generally the case, although we do know of exceptions, as in the case of Haw Boon Par, a Hakka, who married a Gwangdong in Rangoon.

groups of Chinese in Burma: (1) The "short-sleeves" referring to carpenters and coolies and almost always to Gwangdong and (2) the "long-sleeves," referring to merchants and moneylenders, and almost always to the Hokkien. As these two occupational groups lived in divided blocks of Rangoon from the nineteenth century, they were seen as forming two different Chinese communities; not Hokkien and Gwangdong, perhaps, but the division among the Chinese migrants was clearly perceived.

Other self-perceptions among the Chinese are always in the making. In my interviews among the Chinese in Rangoon, for example, I found that the Chinese there had begun to see themselves, Gwangdong, Hokkien and otherwise, as a single migrant Chinese group characterized by sub-ethnic diversity, separately from the Chinese communities in Mandalay and elsewhere in Upper Burma, whom they view as rich and criminal as opposed to themselves who are poor and peaceful. Another interviewee also saw a similar divide, but couched it in different terms, splitting the Chinese into "noodleshop" (local) Chinese and "diplomat" (PRC) Chinese. Likewise, World War II and the PRC's emergence did more than bond the Chinese together as "Chinese," it also created a new division along political lines. Perceptions of the Chinese in Burma as "White Chinese" and those of the PRC as "Red Chinese," as just one example, are commonly voiced by the Chinese in Burma today.

Conclusion

In sum, my argument here is that historiography on the Chinese in Burma has, since the 1820s, relied heavily on three different but mutually-reinforcing state-centred historical narratives (British, Burmese, and Chinese) to the neglect of local historical narratives, particularly those of the Chinese migrants themselves or of local Burmese. The reliance of historians upon textual sources at the centre, and state documents and interests, has played a significant role in influencing the perceptions of the Chinese in Burma both in the past and in the present. These sources do not provide a balanced representation of local and non-local perspectives, but rather the shifting focus of colonial administrators as their interests changed. As Duara has explained, in reference to the tensions between state-centred and local historical narratives, "the powerful repressive

and appropriative functions of national History need to be continually challenged." I think that in the present case as well, when we consider the Chinese in Burma, the impressions locked into colonial and Burmese state documentation need to be challenged and that we should take into consideration not just sources reflective of British colonial interests or the impressions of the Burmese royal courts, the external views, but also local perspectives, the internal view, of the Chinese in Burma.

In short, when researchers have depended upon either British or Burmese state-centred documents and historical narratives, they get a picture of a homogeneous Chinese national community in Burma. Researchers who focus on local source materials and local historical narratives have found a different picture of the Chinese in Burma, one that emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of the Chinese community, or, more accurately, the co-existence of different Chinese communities in Burma. There is thus a tension between the Burmese and the British state-centred approaches, or external view of the Chinese in Burma, and the local approach of recent researchers, who take into consideration internal views of the Chinese in Burma.

General British approaches to the Chinese in Burma appear to have changed several times throughout colonial rule. At several key junctures, British colonial interests shifted their emphases between local and non-local perspectives. In some cases, this agreed with Burmese indigenous historiography, in some cases not. But whether in agreement or not, it is my argument that the tensions between local and non-local perspectives in Burma have had an enormous impact upon the perceptions of the Chinese in colonial and postcolonial historiography in Burma. To generalize the issue, I suggest that this may be one answer or part of the answer for different perceptions of the Chinese in Burma and the Straits in colonial and post-colonial historiography.

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