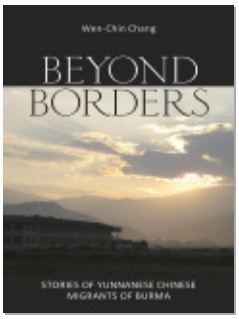
Epilogue: From Mules to Vehicles



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Epilogue

From Mules to Vehicles

In those days living in the mountains, mules and horses were the best companions to human beings, as they shouldered the responsibility for transportation.

—Zhang Dage, 2002

Throughout history, the migration culture of diasporic Yunnanese has largely been characterized by political instability and a peripatetic tradition, which have pushed them to keep moving and often take up itinerant professions. Their economic possibilities have ranged from being muleteers, soldiers, miners, rotating-market traders, or migrant laborers, to caravan traders or jade stone dealers. One may try multiple undertakings during one's lifetime. The transition from one profession to another, however, does not guarantee upward mobility. In reality, one's fortune may fluctuate, as shown in the narrators' stories. Despite this fact, travel has been a prevailing means among migrant Yunnanese for searching out opportunities and success, one that has contributed to their frequent border crossing, geographically and figuratively.

While illuminating a range of diasporic modes (as victim, military, labor, and trade), the narrators' accounts also outline different patterns of movement in relation to their home places in Burma. Some are not able to return; some continually leave and come back; some choose to return after

leaving for a long time; and some return occasionally. No matter what patterns they have followed, travel opens their horizons, enriches their life experiences, and entails a comparative perspective for them to assess multiple lifestyles, places, and peoples. Moreover, it inspires their imaginations for different possible futures. Their departure, whether owing to a need to flee or a desire to pursue ambitions, compels them to say good-bye to their original lifestyle, family members, close friends, and things dear to them. Their migratory stories thus always intertwine complex emotions that project their subjective liminality.

Travel predicates fluidity of time and space. It helps shape travelers' lives and nurtures stories in their memory that in turn stimulate their narrativity. Among themselves, Yunnanese migrants frequently exchange stories of traveling or memories of the past. The writing of this ethnography is also grounded on their narrativity. In this epilogue I would first like to present a dialogue focused on the subject of mules and horses, which epitomizes the temperament of Yunnanese mobility and mirrors an intimate relationship between humans and their animals (from male perspectives in this case).

On August 25, 2008, I met Zhang Dage (the narrator of chapter 1) and Li Dage[1] at a well-known Thai restaurant in Taichung, central Taiwan, characterized by its exquisite cuisine and spacious, luminous structure styled in Thai exoticism. Li Dage is the owner. Like Zhang Dage, he grew up in a mountain village in Shan State and then moved with his family to Xincun in northern Thailand. He came to Taiwan for further education and afterward settled here. Whenever Zhang Dage and Li Dage meet, they have much to talk about—their memories of life in Burma and Thailand, their common friends, and developments in Taiwan.

I clearly remember that day. Classic Thai music filled the air. A montage of fieldwork images from Burma and Thailand flashed through my mind. It was lunchtime, and Zhang Dage ordered an array of splendid dishes—seafood salad, deep-fried shrimp cake, steamed sea bass in lemon sauce, stir-fried pork with Yunnanese pickles, Thai-style fried noodles, tamarind glazed crispy chicken, stir-fried water spinach in Thai bean paste, shrimp vermicelli pot, and sago coconut milk. These Thai and Yunnanese delicacies guaranteed good afternoon talk.

1. Li Dage, the fifth younger brother of Mr. Li (the father in chapter 3), had helped contact his brother about my visit to Taunggyi first in 2006 and again in 2007, although the latter seemed not to have heard about me.

Li Dage told me he had heard much about me and my research from Zhang Dage and was very willing to share his life stories with me. I briefly asked about his biographical information, but quickly he and Zhang Dage took over the conversation, beginning with childhood reminiscences. A major part of their discussion was about mules and horses. I recorded their conversion that day and extracted a part as follows:

Li Dage: "When we lived in Changqingshan, every household had a stable of horses and mules. In the morning, a muleteer would beat a gong—*dong*, *dong*, *dong*—and on hearing it, we would release our livestock and let the muleteer chase them to the higher part of the mountain to graze. That muleteer helped look after all the livestock of the whole village. Villagers had no problem identifying their own animals later in the day. . . .

"Much of Changqingshan was grassland. There was a very tall banyan tree, which we called the 'tree of grand green' [*daqingshu*]. We could see it from afar. It was the only tree on a large piece of grassland where the muleteer took the animals to graze during the day. In the evening, he chased them back to the village. On hearing his beating the gong, villagers would go to bring their animals home."

Zhang Dage: "Our village didn't have a common muleteer. Yours was more organized. Perhaps you had more horses and mules. Every region had its way of doing things. Bianliang was a valley, and the nearby mountain was covered with poppy farms. Each house released its own mules to graze in the morning and went to look for them in the evening. When we saw our neighbors' animals, we also helped chase them back home."

Li Dage: "Well, our place was more organized. . . . There was a large playground with a big pond, and the livestock were kept away from the pond because the water was for humans. The animals were led to a ditch on their way back to the village."

Zhang Dage: "Was the muleteer a kid?"

Li Dage: "No, he was an adult. . . . Our place had another type of horse and mule, which we called *fangsheng ma* [released horse or mule]. They were horses and mules that were too old to carry things. We released them to the mountain and let them die naturally. There was a hierarchy among the livestock. Only those which engaged in transportation were given feed."

Zhang Dage: "Yes, those that participated in the long-distance caravan trade ate the best—they were fed with yellow beans."

Li Dage: "That's right! If a mule took part in transportation that day, it would be rewarded with feed put in a bag."

Zhang Dage: "*Maliao dai* [feedbag]."

Li Dage: "Exactly. It was hung under its mouth, and the mule munched the feed while walking. After the mule returned to the stable, it was again given fodder mixed with feed."

Zhang Dage took my notebook and started to draw a mule (Figure E–1) and explained to me the harness placed on it:

"Wen-Chin, I've mentioned to you that I went to Thailand with an armed caravan. You know at the end of the first day after riding a mule for so long, I couldn't walk. I could hardly stand. I had been given a *jiatou ma*, a mule with no proper saddle but just a wooden frame on its back, which was meant for transporting goods. I had to squat on the framework with one leg braced on the collar [*panxiong*]. When going upward, I could still manage to stay on its back, but when going downward, I kept sliding off the mule. It was dreadful."

Li Dage: "You were lucky to ride a *jiatou ma*. You know what mule I rode from Mong Nai to Thailand? There was neither a saddle, nor a wooden frame, but simply a small piece of tree trunk tied on the back. A piece of quilt was placed under the trunk. Whenever we were moving downward, I slid."

Zhang Dage: "I know what you mean. A piece of bark was made concave, and you put your butt on it. It was very uncomfortable."

Li Dage: "It was. I would rather have walked than ride that mule. Adults kept scolding me: 'You chicken. You dare not ride.' I didn't know how to explain to them."

Zhang Dage: "I had the same experience. We were still kids with short legs, but adults gave us big horses to ride. The structure didn't fit us. There's still another kind of horse and mule—*huama*, with no harness at all. You can only grab its mane while riding. Some people are very good at riding bareback simply by pressing their legs tightly against the horse's sides."

Zhang Dage and Li Dage continued to share funny experiences of riding these types of mules and horses during their childhood, a golden time with unforgettable adventures and joy.

Undoubtedly, horses and mules played a significant role for a great number of migrant Yunnanese in Burma, as they were the major means of transportation for going beyond their villages and engaging in economic pursuits before the mid-1980s.[2] Not only did these animals fulfill many

2. In some places mule, horse, and ox transportation (in small numbers) is still seen.

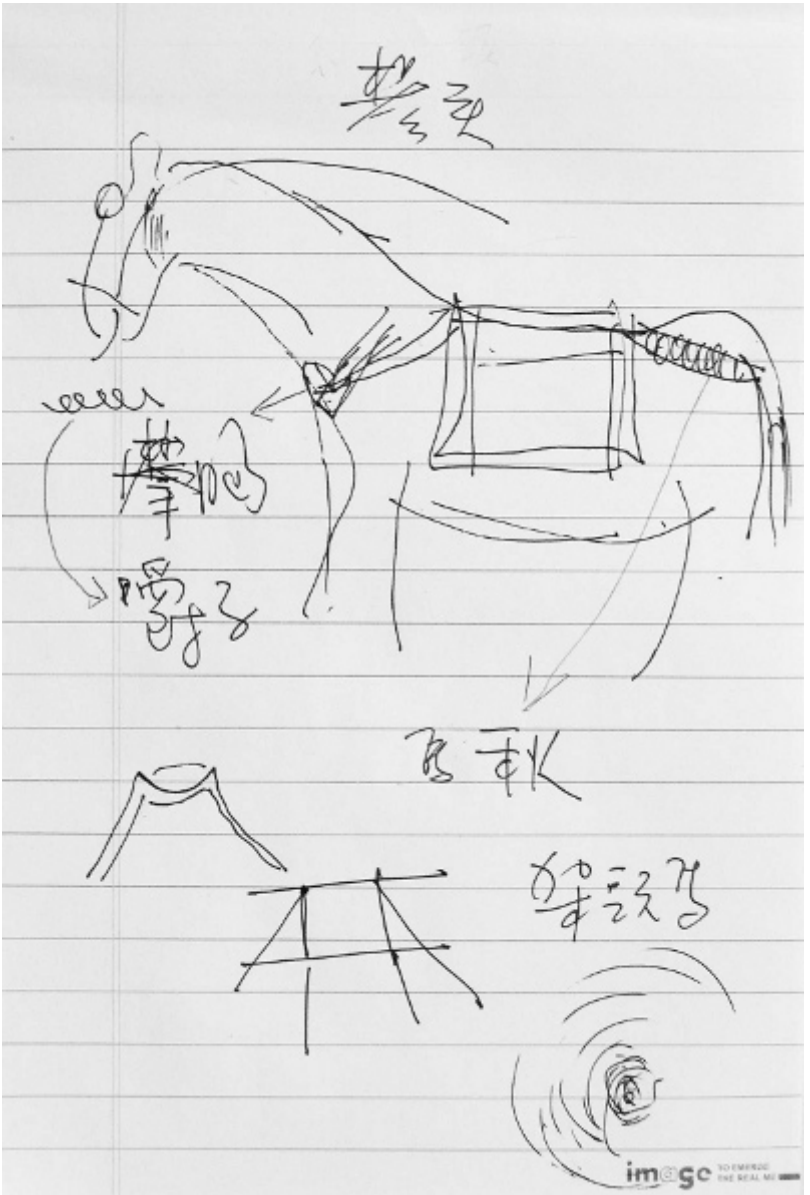

Figure E–1. A harnessed mule sketched by Zhang Dage

Yunnanese ambitions and quests for livelihood; those who had experience of them nurtured these memories with affection. Mules frequently recur in the narratives of the older generation, especially of those who participated in the mule caravan trade, and of those in the generation that followed, as we see in the childhood reminiscences of Zhang Dage and Li Dage. These animals' tracks covered numerous trails throughout the rugged topography in northeastern Burma and the borderlands of northern Thailand.

Being an outsider who grew up in a different place, and not having experienced repeated overland movement under harsh circumstances, I struggled for a long time to envision informants' accounts, both oral and written, and stumbled again and again upon objects I had not seen, places I had not been to, painful feelings I had not endured, as well as inconsistencies in the narratives. To a small extent I became familiar with their descriptions after personally experiencing some of the locations described in their accounts. For the most part, however, I had to manage with my imagination. The caravan trade I heard about so often in stories, with its hundreds or even a thousand or more mules, has become history. Large mule caravans no longer exist in Burma or other countries of upland Southeast Asia.[3] To understand this traveling trade, I came as close as I could to firsthand experience, traveling some parts of the trading routes by car or motorcycle or on foot, observing the landscape and sites that remain there, encountering and conversing with former muleteers and traders. I wish I could take a time machine back through history to the wonderland of the migrant Yunnanese.

The movement of the contemporary Yunnanese migrants from the 1950s to the 1970s was primarily involuntary. Their refugee status, borderland resettlement, and contraband involvement compounded their marginality. However, their livelihood as borderlanders on the move, which has had the effect of connecting them to an expansive outside world and sustaining a significant part of the Burmese economy, especially during the socialist period (though not officially recognized), compels us to rethink their marginality and other peripheral attributes ascribed to them. While reviewing their experiences, which are constrained by national policies and

3. Van Schendel mentions Chinese and Burmese mule caravans near the border with Bangladesh that transport contraband, but he does not provide further details about a caravan's organization or who these "Chinese and Burmese" traders are (2005, 165–66). Judging from a picture of a caravan shown in the book (p. 166; the picture was taken in 2000), its size is small, and the simple organization looks quite different from the ones engaging in long-distance trade that Yunnanese informants described.

regulations, we also witness their dynamism, their power, as well as their struggles to survive, and apprehend what Anna Tsing has tried to do by illuminating the "margins." She says: "I use the term [margins] to indicate an analytic placement that makes evident both the constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion, and the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripherize a group's existence" (1994, 279).

Lifestyle in Shan State has changed much. Given the shift to a market-oriented economy since the end of 1988, Burma (or Myanmar) has been experiencing profound transformations, compounded by numerous ecological, social, and political ruptures. The government has opened several border towns for trade with neighboring countries. They include Muse, Loije, Laiza, Chinshweshaw, and Kambaitti adjacent to China; Tachileik, Myawaddy, and Kawthaung connecting Thailand; and Tamu and Reed bordering India (Maung Chan 2005). Among them, Muse, which adjoins Ruili in Yunnan Province, has been the busiest point since the mid-1990s, owing to the rapid growth of the Sino-Burmese trade. The Ruili-Muse connection has channeled the largest amount of bilateral trade.[4]

Several times, I traveled from Mandalay to Lashio on the "new" Burma Road, and in October 2013 I made my way to Muse and Namkham.[5] This historic route, which witnessed the plying of mule caravans for centuries, is now completely dominated by overloaded trucks, buses, and motorcycles. Yunnanese migrants in Burma, using their familiarity with the route and expertise in the long-distance trade, have assumed a substantial role in transportation ventures and the import-export trade. Some of them have also launched investments in Ruili, Kunming, Guangzhou, and other Chinese cities, especially in the jade and gem trade. In addition, many Yunnanese migrants have expanded to other fields of investment inside Burma,

4. In 2011 China overtook Thailand as Burma's largest trading partner, with trade amounting to US$6.5 billion, according to International Monetary Fund figures (Aye Thidar Kyaw 2012; Kurtenbach 2012). Its investment is concentrated in gas, oil, mining, plantation, and hydroelectric dam projects. For the Chinese side, Ruili/Jiegao handles 70 percent of Yunnanese-Burmese trade, or 34 percent of Sino-Burmese trade (Meng and Si 2009, 16); for the Burmese side, Muse channels 70 percent of the nation's total trading amount with China (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muse,_Burma).

5. The original Burma Road was constructed during the Second World War and ran between Kunming and Lashio, for transporting the Allies' supplies from Burma to China via the Wanding–Kyukok connection at the Sino-Burmese border. The new Burma Road follows by and large the old route via the Ruili–Muse gateway at the border and has been extended from Lashio to Yangon via Mandalay. It has been a primary transportation line in Burma since the 1990s.

including logging, land speculation, construction, crop transactions, fish farming, chicken farming, and running hotels and restaurants.

From the socialist period to the current regime, the economic structure has changed from a highly state-controlled system to a more open but still controlled market-oriented economy (Taylor 2001; Turnell 2009). Corruption remains, or has even intensified (Steinberg 2010, 100–101; Chang 2013). Ethnic conflicts have eased in some areas, but politically, the country remains divided (Chin 2009; Skidmore 2004; Smith 1993; South 2008; Steinberg 2006; Thawnghmung 2012; Wilson 2006). Parallel to the situation in Kalimantan described by Tsing (2005), the arrival of international corporations in the last two years is accelerating Burmese economic explorations and also generating new frictions (Banyan 2013; TSYO 2011; Woods 2012). While exerting their economic agency in response to new economic flexibility, the Yunnanese migrants are also facing an acute backlash from local communities.[6] The display of wealth among some Yunnanese in Yangon and Mandalay—extravagant houses, expensive cars, and excessive wedding parties in particular—incites local discontent. This phenomenon, while pointing to serious unevenness of development in a third-world country, also disguises the fact that the majority of Yunnanese migrants in the country are small- and medium-level merchants.

Taking the perspective from below at the "interstices of transnational and transcultural processes," Thongchai Winichakul calls for traversing "the margins of national identity and national history, looking for the 'in-between' locations of encounters" (2003, 23), or writing "a history at interstices." By composing an ethnography of lives, of individualities, and of a migrant group beyond borders, I have attempted to answer his call and also to carry forth in the spirit of Tsing and other scholars working on the livelihoods of borderlanders. The migration history and economic transnationalism of the contemporary Yunnanese migrants of Burma have provided illuminating insight into the way in which their mercantile dynamism reflects the intricate politico-economic scenarios in Burma. The stories told here negate an essentialized understanding of center versus periphery, legality versus illegality, autochthons versus allochthons, and the absolute legitimacy attached to the nation-state.

6. While those with larger amounts of capital may be seeking collaboration with foreign investments, especially those from China, small merchants may be forced out of business owing to intensive competition. Further research is required to trace this new development.