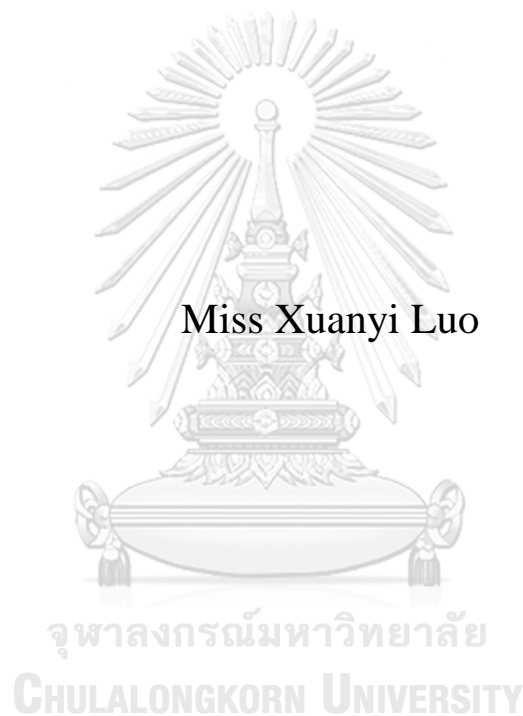


FROM “BURMESE BRIDES” TO BURMESE WIVES:  
ANALYZING TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES OF  
WOMEN FROM MYANMAR TO CHINESE MEN ALONG  
THE MYANMAR-YUNNAN FRONTIER



A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Southeast Asian Studies  
Inter-Department of Southeast Asian Studies  
Graduate School  
Chulalongkorn University  
Academic Year 2018  
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จาก "เจ้าสาวชาวเมียนมา" สู่ภรรยาชาวเมียนมา: วิเคราะห์การแต่งงานข้ามชาติของผู้หญิงเมียนมา  
กับผู้ชายจีนตามแนวชายแดนเมียนมากับยูนนาน



วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต  
สาขาวิชาเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา สหสาขาวิชาเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา  
บัณฑิตวิทยาลัย จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
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Thesis Title                                 **FROM “BURMESE BRIDES” TO BURMESE WIVES:  
ANALYZING TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES OF  
WOMEN FROM MYANMAR TO CHINESE MEN  
ALONG THE MYANMAR-YUNNAN FRONTIER**

By   **Miss Xuanyi Luo**

Field of Study                                 **Southeast Asian Studies**

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The logo of Chulalongkorn University, featuring a central emblem with a crown and a sunburst, flanked by two figures, and a large bowl-like base with decorative elements.

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ฉนวนยี่ ลี้ : จาก "เจ้าสาวชาวเมียนมา" สู่ภรรยาชาวเมียนมา: วิเคราะห์การแต่งงานข้ามชาติของ  
 ผู้หญิงเมียนมากับผู้ชายจีนตามแนวชายแดนเมียนมากับยูนนาน. (FROM “BURMESE  
 BRIDES” TO BURMESE WIVES: ANALYZING  
 TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES OF WOMEN FROM  
 MYANMAR TO CHINESE MEN ALONG THE MYANMAR-  
 YUNNAN FRONTIER) อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก : ดร. โอลิเว สการ์

ตั้งแต่ประมาณปี 2000 ผู้หญิงชาวเมียนมาที่แต่งงานกับผู้ชายในมณฑลยูนนาน สาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน มีจำนวนเพิ่มขึ้น รายงานของสื่อมวลชนในสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน เมียนมา และกลุ่มประเทศตะวันตก มักเรียกผู้หญิงเหล่านี้ว่า "เจ้าสาวชาวเมียนมา" และเชื่อมโยงพวกเธอกับการค้ามนุษย์ การแต่งงานปลอม เอชไอวีและเอดส์ ท่ามกลางปัญหาอื่นๆ ปัจจุบันดังกล่าวทำให้ผู้หญิงเหล่านี้มีภาพลักษณ์ด้านลบต่อสาธารณชน และถูกมองว่าโดยปกติแล้ว พวกเธอมีความเสี่ยงที่จะตกเป็นเหยื่อในขบวนการแต่งงานข้ามชาติ วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้มุ่งเน้นที่จะแก้ไขมุมมองอันจำกัดนี้ และให้ภาพที่กว้างยิ่งขึ้นของผู้หญิงเหล่านี้ นอกจากนี้จะเน้นไปยังบทบาทของพวกเธอในการเลือกหรือ "ความสามารถกระทำการ (agency)" ในการสร้างรูปแบบการแต่งงานข้ามชาติของพวกเธอ ซึ่งอยู่นอกเหนือจากมุมมองของ "เจ้าสาวชาวเมียนมา" โดยพิจารณาความเติบโตของการแต่งงานข้ามชาติ จากมุมมองเชิงโครงสร้าง (มหภาค) และมุมมองเชิงปัจเจก (ผู้กระทำการเป็นศูนย์กลาง (agency-centered)) บังคับเชิงโครงสร้างหลัก ที่ส่งผลการขายตัวของการแต่งงานข้ามชาติ ประกอบด้วยความนิยมในการย้ายถิ่นของสตรีในวงกว้าง การจำกัดขอบเขตกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ในพื้นที่แนวชายแดน ความไม่เสมอภาคทางเศรษฐกิจ ความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศ และผลจากการบีบบังคับให้แต่งงานในจีน ปัญหาสงครามกลางเมืองกับปัญหาสุขภาพจิตและโรคเอดส์ในเมียนมา ตลอดจนนโยบายและกฎหมายเรื่องการแต่งงาน สำหรับปัจเจกปัจเจก เชื่อมโยงกับการเลือกและการตัดสินใจ วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้วิเคราะห์ว่าหญิงชาวเมียนมาใช้ความเป็น "ความสามารถกระทำการ (agency)" ของพวกเธอ หรือสร้างอำนาจในการตัดสินใจ โดยใช้และขายเครือข่ายทางสังคมอย่างไร พวกเธอจึงสามารถเข้าไปมีส่วนร่วมในการแต่งงานหลากหลายรูปแบบ ประกอบด้วยการอาสาตัว หรือคิดต่อเรื่องแต่งงานตามเงื่อนไขของตนเอง โดยทำตามแรงจูงใจของตนเอง มากกว่าจะเข้าไปเกี่ยวข้องกับการแต่งงานที่ถูกบังคับโดยไร้ทางเลือกได้ มุมมองทั้งสองแบบมีส่วนทำให้หญิงชาวเมียนมาที่แต่งงานกับผู้ชายตามแนวชายแดน มีจำนวนเพิ่มขึ้น งานวิจัยฉบับนี้มาจากการวิเคราะห์รายงานของสื่อเกี่ยวกับปัญหา "เจ้าสาวชาวเมียนมา" ผ่าน 20 บทสัมภาษณ์ของผู้หญิงชาวเมียนมาที่แต่งงานกับชายชาวจีน ระหว่างเดือนกรกฎาคม ปี 2018 ถึงเดือนกุมภาพันธ์ ปี 2019 ในพื้นที่ชนบทและเมืองของนครลู่ลี่ กับอำเภอเถิงชง ในจังหวัดเต๋อหง และเมืองเป่าซาน นอกจากนี้ยังไปเยี่ยมชมหน่วยงานท้องถิ่น และหน่วยงานราชการในมณฑลยูนนานตามลำดับ การวิเคราะห์เหล่านี้มีวัตถุประสงค์คือ แสดงให้เห็นว่าการแต่งงานข้ามชาติระหว่างหญิงชาวเมียนมากับชายชาวจีน เพิ่มขึ้นในศตวรรษที่ 21 เพราะเหตุใด และอย่างไร โดยมุ่งเน้นไปยังบทบาทของหญิงชาวเมียนมา ผู้กระทำการในการแต่งงานกับชายในยูนนาน

สาขาวิชา เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา  
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## 6087552120 : MAJOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

KEYWORD: Burmese Brides, Transnational marriages, Myanmar-Yunnan Frontier,  
Agency

Xuanyi Luo : FROM “ BURMESE BRIDES” TO BURMESE WIVES:  
ANALYZING TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES OF WOMEN FROM  
MYANMAR TO CHINESE MEN ALONG THE MYANMAR-YUNNAN  
FRONTIER. Advisor: Lowell Skar, Ph.D.

Since around 2000, there has been a growth of Myanmar women who have married men in Yunnan, China. Media reports from China, Myanmar and the West typically call these women “Burmese brides” and link them to human trafficking, fake marriages, HIV-AIDS, among other issues. This gives the public a negative impression of these women, and views them as mostly vulnerable victims caught in a faceless transnational marriage process. This thesis seeks to correct this limited view and provide a fuller picture of these women and to stress the role of their choice or “agency” in forming their transnational marriages beyond the perspective of “Burmese brides” by examining this growth from a structural (macro) perspective and an individual (agency-centered) perspective. Key structural factors affecting the expansion of transnational marriage include a broad feminization of migration trend, ethnic ties in border areas, economic disparities, gender imbalance and the resulting marriage squeeze in China, civil war and drug-AIDS issues in Myanmar, marriage policies and laws. For individual factors tied to choices and decisions, this thesis examines how Myanmar women exercise their “agency” or decision-making powers by using and expanding social networks so they can actively participate in diverse types of marriage practices, including voluntary (autonomous) or commercial marriages on their own terms, by following their own varied motivations, rather than merely being passively involved in forced marriages. Both of these perspectives have contributed to the growth of Myanmar women who marry men in the border. This research bases on analyzing media reports about “Burmese brides” issues, 20 interviews with Myanmar women who marry Chinese men conducted between July 2018 and February 2019 in rural and urban areas of Ruili and Tengchong districts, in Dehong prefecture and Baoshan city, respectively as well as visits to local and regional government offices in Yunnan. These analyses aim to show how and why these China-Myanmar transnational marriages increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, stressing the role of Myanmar women's agency in marrying men in Yunnan.

Field of Study: Southeast Asian Studies  
Academic Year: 2018

Student's Signature .....  
Advisor's Signature .....

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to express my special thanks and gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Lowell Skar, for his help and patience in guiding me to complete this thesis. Whenever I have questions or problems with my research or writing, Dr. Lowell always takes time to lead me in the right direction, no matter how busy he is. My thesis would have been impossible without his help and support. I would also like to thank my committee Chairman Professor Dr. Sunait Chutintaranond and examiner Associate Professor Dr. Aree Jampaklay, who participated in my thesis's defense, for their important insights and useful suggestions, all of which provided very important and meaningful guidance for my study.

I am profoundly grateful to the 20 Myanmar women I interviewed in Yunnan. Their enthusiastic and unreserved sharing of their experiences with me and accepting my participation in their lives or social activities provided great narrative support and evidence for my research during the field work. I would also like to thank the government officials in Yunnan for providing me with useful information within the scope of their duties.

In addition, I must give my deep gratitude to my parents, my relatives and friends for their continuous support and encouragement during my study and the process of writing this thesis and also thank the staff of the Southeast Asian Studies Program at Chulalongkorn University for their patient and timely assistance to all issues about my thesis. Without them, I could not have finished this project.

Finally, my sincere thanks to Professor Jianwen Qu at the Center of Thai Studies at Yunnan University for his resources and help during my field work, which lead me to collect more information and materials.

Xuanyi Luo

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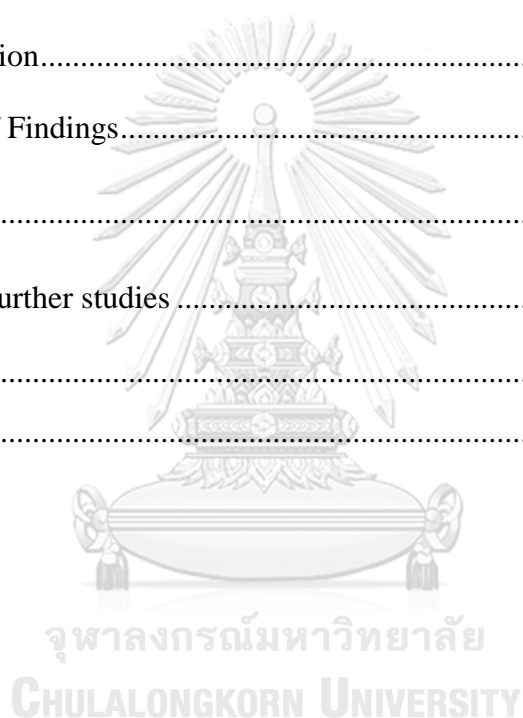
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## Background

In February 2018, I returned to my hometown, Yongping County in Dali Prefecture, Yunnan, China. Fresh news about men from six local families taking Burmese women as wives – called “Burmese brides” by locals – was widespread. Although my home is not on the Myanmar-Chinese border, it is near Baoshan prefecture, which does border Myanmar. One of my Muslim friends of the locals told me that in her village had one of the six men who married a “Burmese bride” who was almost 45 years old. Since he could not find a suitable spouse in the area, he had heard from a go-between that he could go to Ruili and find a “Burmese bride” whose bride’s bride price was not too high. After he met the Burmese woman in Ruili, they decided to live together. The man gave the marriage broker 2000 RMB [≈ \$288 US] and, with his help, he brought home his “Burmese bride” even though she had no official identity documents. The new couple got along well, and there is no friction, despite their different languages, religions, culture and nationalities. They have maintained a stable marriage relationship for more than ten months without any official marriage certificate.

This incident made me wonder about many things. To start with, transnational – similar to cross-border – marriage was new in my hometown. I wondered why this woman from Myanmar wanted to marry a man in China whom she did not know. How did the woman enter China? Who were the brokers? How did the man find the broker? How did he select a woman? Why does this bride have no valid official identity documents? How do relevant law enforcement agencies or government deal with this type of situation? What are the lives of these Burmese brides like after marriage? How common is this type of cross-border marriage?

Such questions led me to learn more about this phenomenon. Preliminary research made it clear that the phenomena have been common in recent years, appearing widely in the news, in government policies, and NGO reports and in academic research. The growing trend of “Burmese brides” in China is not only showing in

Yunnan, but also expanding into the inland provinces – even to distinct mountainous areas or coastal areas in China.

Dehong prefecture in southwestern Yunnan province borders Myanmar, and has four official access points to Myanmar: Ruili, Wanding, Yingjiang and Zhangfeng. A partial survey conducted by Chinese scholars, with incomplete data, shows that in 2012, Dehong had 1865 China-Myanmar transnational marriages that taken places more than ten years before, while the marriages of that type that took place in the previous decade had grown to more than 6751 (Chen and Yang 2016, 108). Moreover, this incomplete survey shows that almost all transnational marriages were those between Myanmar women and Chinese men. In addition, more data from border cities in Yunnan outside Dehong prefecture shows a similar pattern: growing numbers of transnational marriage of Myanmar women with Chinese men in Yunnan.

The Myanmar women who married Chinese men are often called 缅甸新娘 [*Mindian xinniàng*] in Chinese or "Burmese brides" in English. While in earlier times these women tended to marry men in Yunnan from their own ethnic group that span the Yunnan-Myanmar frontier, more recently, Myanmar women have begun marrying men from a wider set of ethnic groups and in wider geographical areas of China beyond borderland areas – in China's inland and coastal areas (Wang 2014, 56). Several points are important to note. First, many ethnic groups have long lived along the China-Myanmar frontier and regularly have interacted with one another, speaking the same language and sharing the same culture. These groups have been newly divided by the national borderline between Myanmar and China. Early transnational marriages often formed between couples from the same ethnic group but in recent times, Myanmar women have chosen spouses not only from their own same ethnic group in China, but from different ethnic groups, including from the majority Han Chinese men (Yang 2011, 48). There are growing numbers of reports in mainstream media in inland and coastal areas of China of more and more "Burmese brides" or in non-border areas of Yunnan, so they are no longer confined to the Yunnan border

areas.<sup>1</sup> Finally, many reports of Yunnan government agencies show government concern with the numbers of “illegal” transnational marriages with “Burmese brides”, since the vast majority of “Burmese brides” lack legal identity documents or immigration materials (Chen 2018, 127-129).

Based on the above situation, therefore, the “Burmese brides” phenomenon is seen to be testing the social management and institutions of Myanmar and China and the relations between the two countries. National social management and system is complex, there are some social problems in Myanmar-China transnational marriage since it is related to human trafficking, mercenary marriage, legal recognition of transnational marriages, the fragile social status of women and their children in transnational marriages, among other things. Therefore, studying this topic has some valuable social significance.

Despite being a recognized problem, there is little relevant literature on transnational marriage between China and Southeast Asia, much less on transnational marriage between China and Myanmar. Research in English is mostly non-existent, with most researchers focusing on marriage in the same ethnic group, or on human trafficking, mercenary marriage and the like. Relevant Chinese literature is also small, and most based on data collected from Yunnan villages, using anthropological methods to analyze the causes, and to address social problems of transnational marriage, which are highly limited localized and empirical data-gathering, with little analysis or interpretation. This research will help fill a gap in understanding China-Myanmar transnational marriage.

Southeast Asian women have long married men from Asia's more-developed countries, and in recent decades, this phenomenon has attracted the attention of the

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<sup>1</sup> More and more mainstream Chinese media have reported cases of Chinese men marrying Myanmar women, which happened in non-border areas. For example, China's national media CCTV Channel 12 reported two cases of “Burmese Brides” in Xinghua City, Jiangsu Province in 2016.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPR\\_6OfLYKk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPR_6OfLYKk).



mass media and of scholars. Most research in the more developed Asia receiving countries centers on the illegality of these Southeast Asian brides, who are often associated with illegal entry, human trafficking, drug trafficking, smuggling and other criminal activities. These associations link the term "Southeast Asian brides" to "human trafficking", "mercenary marriage", "forced marriage" and other negative tags. For example, Taiwan, as a typical receiving region of "Southeast Asia brides", pays great attention to "Southeast Asia brides" as a social issue, with media reports often focusing on negative topics like prostitution, fake marriages, domestic violence and illegal work. Although the media may just want to provide information about the dilemmas faced by these women, it also influences the public views of women in transnational marriage, giving the public a negative impression, or even stigmatization of them (Cai 2009).

Few studies exist on transnational marriages in Myanmar and China. The media and civil society usually describe this phenomenon under the label of "Burmese brides". There is no doubt that some China's "Burmese brides" are caught up in illegal activities and issues like those seen in "Southeast Asian brides", but there are some distinctions, too. The geography means that China shares a border with Myanmar, so the people of two countries along the border have close contacts that go back centuries. The interconnected spaces on the Myanmar-Yunnan border have produced interconnected societies and economies, too, meaning that marriages across the border have long been common and are normally based on their voluntary will. Negative labels like "Burmese brides" and the reporting around them has given rise to a stereotype and created a general misunderstanding in the public that "Burmese brides" are victims of forced marriage crimes. Moreover, relevant laws and public consciousness in China, Myanmar and the international community often considers these Burmese brides' marriages to be illegal, which ignores the larger part of those who married voluntarily. Such views leave those women's rights unprotected. The clearest sign of this is that the rights of "Burmese brides" who married in China are not

guaranteed by China's laws. Because brides could not issue materials from Myanmar required by the local civil affairs department to apply for marriage licenses, they could not register their marriages. According to Chinese laws, they were illegal marriages and can't register in Chinese household system (*Hukou*). This directly led to their inability to enjoy medical insurance, minimum living security system or other benefits after marriage. The same problem will affect their parents and especially their children. If the children are not registered in the household system, they will not be eligible to receive free compulsory education in China (Huang and Long 2017, 69).

The problem is that such voluntary transnational marriages do not involve human trafficking, smuggling and other criminal acts, but this has not been properly and justly recognized. Thus, this thesis seeks to provide a fuller and richer perspective on the "Burmese brides" in Yunnan. This will help China, Myanmar, and the international community to better distinguish the differences between voluntary and forced transnational marriages, and to find ways to protect the people in voluntary transnational marriages.

The "Burmese Brides" stereotype comes not only from various media, but also from national residents who follow the media. This is understandable, since most people only understand the situation based on the media reports they watch and not from other sources or direct contact with Burmese brides. On March 15, 2018, I spoke with my Myanmar classmate, Ms. Lin Lin Kyi.

*Me: Lin, do you know that there are a lot of voluntary love-based cross-border marriages in the border areas between China and Myanmar?*

*[She was very surprised in her reply]: Really? I have no ideas about this. However, I often read from websites and newspapers that our women are usually forced to marry Chinese men, such as when they are being cheated or being trafficked.*

Lin Lin Kyi is from Rakhine State in Myanmar, in western Myanmar, far from the China-Myanmar border, and she has not been to the Myanmar-China borderlands. Her knowledge of “Burmese brides” comes only from the media. Myanmar is a country that stresses this as an issue of human trafficking, especially in its NGOs and civil society organizations.

These organizations often have their own websites and journals and newspapers, and make voice through the power of those media. Since their focus is on human rights issues like human trafficking, their reports, articles, press releases typically stress those topics. Such reports help to produce common stereotypes of “Burmese brides” for the public, so they see only one side of the transnational marriage issue based on human trafficking and forced marriage. This is made clear by doing simple search of the keyword “Burmese brides” on Google. Nearly all search results were on reports about forced marriages and human trafficking related to China. This shows how stereotypes have become embedded in the media. Such stereotypes shape views of non-border residents in China-Myanmar border areas, and help to stigmatize “Burmese brides”. To remedy this situation, this thesis will seek analyze the diverse lived practices of China-Myanmar transnational marriages giving them a fuller and more nuanced perspective. It will also point out that human trafficking is only one way that transnational marriages form in China and Myanmar. The thesis will try to analyze other lived types of marriages of Burmese women in China, like: voluntary marriage and commercial marriage. The aim is to provide a fuller understanding of transnational marriages of “Burmese brides” in China.

This thesis will mainly use qualitative anthropological methods to obtain first-hand information about “Burmese brides” in the border areas through site visits, interviews, observations and participation records of field investigations. At the same time, I will use narratives of the brides’ life stories to contextualize how marriage fits into their live course. I will then figure out the living conditions of “Burmese brides” before

marriage and the social network construction after marriage, and the degree of expression of the Burmese brides' agency in the transnational marriage.

## **Literature Review**

There are two main terms for transnational marriage: cross-border marriage and international marriage. While similar, previous literature shows the mean slightly different things. Transnational marriage is a kind of immigration, so it is possible to see transnational marriage from the perspective of immigration. Reviewing the research on transnational marriage between other countries will provide some useful ideas, directions and methods for this thesis. Myanmar and China are in Asia, so it is useful to review research on Asian transnational marriage, besides research on transnational marriage in China and Myanmar.

### **1. Concept definitions**

In earlier research, scholars often used the term “cross-border marriages” while more recently many scholars prefer the terms “transnational marriages” and “international marriages”. But the difference between these terms is not always clear. Sometimes, they are mixed-use, but the essential meaning is the same: both refer to a marriage concluded by two people from different countries. For subtle differences, Melody Chia-wen Lu has related the terms “cross-border and transnational marriage”, arguing that “cross-border marriage” emphasizes “border(s)” which could be shaped by the geography, race, gender, class and culture of the immigrant receiving country, with the focus being on demographic and social problems that cross-border marriages cause to receiving countries. She views the stress on “transnational marriage” not only immigrant receiving countries but also on immigrant sending countries, so it is often used to study the transnational networks and spaces created by marriage immigrants themselves, as well as the economic, cultural, and social practices of both receiving and sending countries (Lu 2007, 3). International marriage meanwhile should be relative to “internal” or “domestic”, and its scope is even broader since it emphasizes

two or more than two nations. In some cases, it is considered that avoiding materialized prejudice or discrimination against women who are immigrant to marriage or no need to point out the immigrant's nationality, gender, etc., generally "international" would be adopted.

Because the theoretical focus in this thesis is based on transnationalism theory and discussion based on receiving countries and sending countries, I will use term "transnational marriage", but I still retain the other terms when I rephrase or quote from references. Therefore, all three terms may appear in this thesis, with similar meanings.

## **2. The feminization of global migration**

The analysis of migration trends from scholars Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller argues for a major change in migration. They believe that the time from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century is an "era of international migration", and the main migration trends will be manifested in several key trends: globalization, acceleration, diversification and feminization (Castles, Haas, and Miller 2014, 16-17). Research by Meenakshi Thapan shows that people from developing countries have been looking for jobs in developed countries since the early 20th century when a majority of migrants were men, while women are mostly family members accompanying men and are considered to be followers. After the 1960s, women migration gradually developed into autonomous migration, and they no longer follow men's mobility like men's appendages (Wan, Zhu, and Tang 2013, 107). The United Nations International Immigration Report showed that since 1960, the number of female immigrants has continued to increase globally, so that by 2006 it has exceeded half of the total number of immigrants. From a regional perspective, the proportion of women in the Southeast Asian immigrants has also exceeded half, and the percentage of female immigrants continues to increase (Wan, Zhu, and Tang 2013, 107). With the feminization of global migration, as a form of migration, transnational marriage also shows the same trend in the wake of this trend, female marriage migration or labor

migration has attracted the attention of scholars from various countries and regions. In Asia and Southeast Asia, female transnational marriage migration has become a main proposition of scholars. Moreover, research on female transnational marriage immigration has gradually tended to be "gendered" perspective.

### **3. Transnational marriage migration in Asia**

Much research on transnational marriages in Asia and Southeast Asia started in the 1980s, but even earlier, Asian women were known to migrate to Western countries through marriage. After World War II ended, many immigrants moved from Japan to the US. Later, many single Japanese women sent their photos to Japanese men who settled in the United States to become partners in this way. The US government even enacted the 1945 War Brides Act to help these women migrate to the United States. Therefore, these women are also known as "picture brides" (Chen 2018, 45). Since the 1970s, female marriage immigrants have been tied to so-called "mail-order brides", which is a kind of practice form of cross-border marriage facilitated by cross-border intermediaries operating a series of media (network, newspapers, etc.). At the same time, many Asian women moved to marry Western men following laws of demographic supply and demand. Many such brides came from Southeast Asian countries in the 1970s and 1980s, from Eastern Europe and other less developed countries in the 1990s and early in this century, while men are mainly from the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, Japan and other developed countries (Wan, Zhu, and Tang 2013, 107). Since marriage migrations are often associated with gender, culture, class, these brides are considered to be vulnerable and unprotected by law in the process of cross-border migration (Mann and Grimes 2001, 3-22). Cross-border marriage migration is a kind of geographical migration, which usually uses the cultural practice of "patrilocal" marriage, where a bride moves into the husband's family and in-laws after marriage. This pattern shows that the brides lack much agency because they must follow marriage arrangements. But in the cases studied by Nicole Constable, brides have their own power of choice and free will for marriage

(Constable 2005). The connection between cross border marriage and class is embodied in a kind of gender mobility form called “Hypergamy”, meaning that marriage flows usually involve brides moving from less developed countries or regions to more developed countries or regions (Chen and Yang 2016, 107). Such marriages are often considered a strategy for women to improve their economic and social status, and they play a role in some of the cases I study.

Cross-border marriage migration in Asia received more attention, due to the rise of women's cross-border marriages also received responses in Asia. The number of cross-border marriages in Asia is increasing and dominated by women, and these marriages mainly include men from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as receiving countries of immigrants, and women from the Philippines, mainland China, Vietnam, and Indonesia as sending countries (Chen and Yang 2016, 109).

The volume edited by Melody Chia-Wen Lu and Wen-Shan Yang describes the demographic patterns of cross-border marriage immigrants in Asia from demographic features in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, emphasizing social life conditions in the sending countries and wifehood and social network construction in the receiving countries (Lu and Yang 2010). Nicola Piper and Sohoon Lee analyze the relationship between Asian marriage migrants' gender and migrant precarity from various angles. It mainly includes the relationship between the various precarities faced by female immigrants and the social economy and law of the country, then, illustrate the changes in family patterns and social reproduction within marriage migration, etc. (Piper and Lee 2016, 473-493). Scholars like Chinsung Chung, Keuntae Kim and Nicola Piper interpret cross-border marriage migration in Southeast Asia from the perspective of “migration-development nexus”, which note how the family makes a huge influence on Southeast Asia cross-border marriage, but marriage migration is beyond institution of the family, which relates to migration-development nexus. This affects the governance of global migration, policies of countries and

international organizations to promote and better understand migration flows (Chung, Kim, and Piper 2016, 463-472).

Some scholars focus on the negative phenomena in cross-border marriage migration, such as human trafficking, commercial marriage, and cross-border marriage intermediary problems. For example, Oksana Yakushko and Indhushree Rajan compared human trafficking with "mail-order brides" in their study, and introduced the role of international marriage agencies in promoting the relationship between men and women in two countries (Oksana and Rajan 2016, 190-206). On the contrary, Melody Chia-Wen Lu, based on her studying the case of commercially arranged marriages between Taiwanese men and women from mainland of China and Southeast Asia, and matchmaking or marriage brokerage, questions the argument that commercial arranged marriages are often seen as a form of women trafficking or mail-order brides (Lu 2005, 275-303).

#### **4. China-Myanmar cross-border marriage**

Since the reform and opening-up policies began round 1979, China's economy has rapidly developed. China has become a receiving country for Southeast Asian women wanting to marry men in China, whereas before many Chinese sought to move out of their country. With the growth of cross-border marriages in border areas between China and Southeast Asian countries since about 2000, there are many issues and phenomena worthy of academic attentions, including the "Burmese brides" phenomenon. There have been few studies of the "Burma brides" phenomenon or China-Myanmar transnational marriages. But Chinese and Western scholars have viewed the topic from different perspectives.

Many anthropologists have looked to the history, causes, current situation and problems of cross-border marriage in China and Southeast Asian countries. Elena Barabantseva argues that in Yao villages on the Sino-Vietnamese border, traditional ethnic marriages become cross-border marriages because of country-building and the



sharper demarcation of borders. Then, because of China's population security problems and the establishment of border immigration management system, the traditional cross-border marriage changed from something common (*shishi*) marriage to something illegal (undocumented) (Barabantseva 2015, 352-268). Similarly, Mo Li describes the current situation of traditional transnational inter-ethnic marriage between two transnational ethnic groups in the China-Myanmar border areas: Dai people and Jingpo People. Mo Li also introduces issues of the social and cultural adaptation of Burmese wives who are in those marriages (Mo 2013, 122). Meanwhile, Yang Wenyi analyses the history, current situation and causes of cross-border marriage in border areas from the perspectives of geography, ethnicity and cultural similarity (Yang 2011, 47-50). New practices of cross-ethnic marriages have begun to displace inter-ethnic marriage and traditional forms of intra-ethnic marriage. In Xiaoyan Wang's study, reforms of rural social life and changes in the marriage market have expanded the migration and communication of the border peoples, which led to similar expansions of marriages to wider regions and more diverse ethnic groups (Wang 2014, 56).

Sociologists often describe the social identity, social adaptation, health problems, social protection system and children' education of those "Southeast Asia brides". Huang Kai and Long Yalan focus on social identity issues to analyze problems of group identity, national identity in transnational marriage, and legal dilemmas faced by transnational marriage and think about how to perfect the laws and regulations of transnational marriage (Huang and Long 2017, 68-76); while Jiafang Yang, Zhang Teng and Hu Anyan research the prevention of HIV and HIV infectious status in Burmese brides issue (Yang, Zhang, and Hu 2013); and Shujuan Zhao is concerned about the legal status and environmental problems of the children of Burmese brides in China (Zhao 2013, 150-151).

Economic perspective led scholars to discuss the economic gaps between China and neighboring countries of Southeast Asia as a key motivation for the increase of

China-Myanmar cross-border marriages. In their survey, Ying Mei and Hongjun Li found that Myanmar brides living in remote areas with poor transportation and economic backwardness encourages them to see marriage as a way to change their economic and social status (Mei and Li 2015, 30).

From a legal perspective, scholars mainly analyze the illegality of cross-border marriages and propose solutions like enforcing legal marriages and preventing human trafficking. The related laws cover China's marriage law, nationality law, entry and exit management law and criminal law, Myanmar's relevant human rights laws and the UN's anti-human trafficking laws. Erin M. Kamler from the US thinks the Kachin conflict led to more women being trafficked into Yunnan province (Kamler 2015, 209-234). From China, Quanbao Jiang, Li Ying and from Spain Jesús J. Sánchez Barricarte argue that women in neighboring countries were trafficked to China to redress its gender gap (Jiang, Li, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2011, 1-26).

From the perspective of international relations, scholars mainly focus on attitudes and countermeasures for cross-border marriages between relevant countries. Zhongyi Liu thinks that “the Brides from Southeast Asia” would have a negative impact on China's security (Liu 2013, 19-27); so it needs better implementation of management policies to reduce the negative impact such marriages may have on China's national security. Xianghua Hou's studies illegal marriage immigration situations in relation to national security, population movement, and national sovereignty (Hou 2012, 59-63). Starting from the international relations between China and Myanmar, Zhengxue Yue explored the characteristics, causes and illegal social problems brought by illegal marriage migration, and also proposed management opinions on illegal cross-border marriage migration (Yue 2014, 24). In summary, this important research provides a guiding role for my thesis. But because research on cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar is sparse, there is a need to better understand it.

First of all, most studies of cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar focus on China as a receiving country to discuss the motives, status quo and social problems of Myanmar women as brides. While ignoring the background of the cross-border marriage in Asia, China is a traditional female migrant sending country. One reasons for the formation of China-Myanmar cross-border marriages stems from the transformation of China's status from sending country to receiving country. Moreover, these studies also overlook the nature of cross-border marriage as an act of immigration, lack theoretical support, rarely combined with cross-border marriage and immigration theory to discuss. So putting the cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar in the context of global and Asian marriage migration is necessary.

Secondly, most current studies on cross-border marriage migration and state policies in China and Myanmar remain in the stability of these marriages to Chinese society, China's population security and China's border management, and are rarely discussed from the sending country, Myanmar.

Thirdly, the local practice of cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar has not been fully understood. Due to the sharp increase in such marriages, China's relevant laws and systems are relatively backward, and it is unable to cope with the social problems arising from the surge in time. The result is the illegal state of such marriages. Coupled with the uncoordinated gender ratio of China's domestic population, the lack of women in rural areas of China, the increase in the number of female trafficking in Myanmar, and the selective coverage of the media, which shaped the public's stereotype of the Burmese bride that was forced to marry the Chinese man or was a vulnerable, helpless party in a cross-border marriage. However, in fact, forced marriage is only a kind of practice in cross-border marriage. In the border areas, free marriage is common. Burmese brides are not fragile and helpless. Their cross-border marriages were the result of their active initiative in agency. Therefore, it is very

necessary to understand more about the lived practices of cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar.

Finally, some studies describe the life of Burmese brides in China from a sociological perspective, including their identity, social adaptation, health issues, social security, and the education of their children. But this does not fully explain their multiple roles in China as worker, mother, daughter in law, etc. Besides, we also should pay more attention to their life in Myanmar, in order to better understand the differences of life in two countries (Those differences can make them willing to marry to in China). Therefore, their life in Myanmar and the womanhood in China should be better understood. There is still research that needs to be done on Burmese women who have married Chinese men in the border areas of Yunnan which this thesis aims to address.

### **Research Question**

How to explain the expansion of “Burmese brides” – transnational marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men – in southwestern areas of Yunnan province in China since 2000?

### **Hypothesis/Argument**

The growing numbers of “Burmese brides” in China-Myanmar transnational marriage can best be understood when interpreted from two perspectives:

From a structural perspective, the expansion of transnational marriages on the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier has often been explained as due to the broad feminization trend of migration; ethnic ties in border areas, economic disparities are also important as are the gender imbalance and related marriage squeeze in China; the Myanmar civil war and the persecution of AIDS and drugs in northern Myanmar; even the constraints of national laws and policies in China and Myanmar.

From an individual perspective, “Burmese brides” often exercise their agency in improving their marriage opportunities (voluntary, commercial and forced marriage), permitting them more individual socioeconomic choices for themselves by marrying Chinese men in Yunnan, China, thus contributing to the expansion of China-Myanmar transnational marriages.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To identify the reasons for the growth of transnational marriages between women from Myanmar with men in border areas of Yunnan, China
2. To interpret the changing transnational marriage patterns and practices of Myanmar women on the China-Myanmar frontier
3. To understand the reasons for Myanmar women to marry Chinese men in Yunnan

### **Theoretical Framework**

Transnational marriage is a kind of international migration. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the relevant theories of international migration which originated from the West. Western scholars made significant contributions to establishing international migration theory. Early on, migration scholar Stephen Castles divided international migration theory into two types: functionalist and historical-structural (Castles, Haas, and Miller 2014, 27). The functionalist paradigm mainly includes push-pull theory and neoclassical economic theory, while the historical-structural paradigm mainly includes dual or segmented labor market theories and world systems theory. As the number of international migrants continues to grow, the motivations and conditions of migration become more complex, and scholars began questioning the validity of early migration theories. These critiques led to new migration theories, such as the new economics of migration theory, transnationalism, immigration system theory, cumulative causation theory, social network theory, and so on. Among them, two more suitable and representative theories are used in this paper:

***Push-pull theory.*** The theory originated in the “push-pull model” proposed by E.G. Ravenstein in the nineteenth century in his studies of population migration. This theory distinguishes two types of factors that shape migration patterns: 1) negative “push” factors in the residence areas of potential migrants that encourage them to leave, and 2) positive “pull” factors that attract potential migrants toward possible destinations for them settle (Lee 1966, 47-57). This theory is basic to many approaches to understanding international migration, so we will use it to analyze the causes of China-Myanmar transnational marriages in chapter 4 of the thesis. At the macro level, differences in basic national conditions of two countries affect marriage mobility. Some factors in the sending country’s migrants push people to migrate out and some factors of the receiving countries attract migrants to settle there.

***Transnationalism theory.*** This theory is representative of emerging theories and is based on anthropology and tied to studies of diaspora. The theory holds that migration is shaped by patterns of expanding globalization, which produce the interweaving of communication, transportation and trade. Transnationalism likewise believes that as migrants cross national borders, they establish social fields connecting their place of origin and their migration destinations. This directly leads to social, cultural, economic and political changes in both the sending and receiving countries, and tests the formulation of relevant national immigration policies (Chen 2018, 65-66). This theory will be used throughout the thesis, especially in chapter 5’s analysis and interpretation of the 20 Burmese brides I interviewed. They created social networks of Burmese bride in China and in their home country Myanmar.

Secondly, most research on transnational marriage in Asia sees gender migration theory fundamental to understanding marriage migration today, but little research uses gendered research theory to understand China-Myanmar transnational marriage. Therefore, we will analyze the similarities and differences between China-Myanmar

transnational marriage and Asian transnational marriage in the light of gendered analysis.

Thirdly, transnationalism has been widely used in understanding the feminization and gendered aspects of migration. Since transnationalism could be used to distinguish individual actors from the state and permit greater nuanced contextual analysis, transnationalism will also focus more on the agency of the actor in relation to their geographic, historical and political context (Kim 2013, 12).

Agency interacts with gender and marriage in multiple ways. The World Bank pointed out in its 2012 report that agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups make effective choices and translate those choices into desired outcomes. It can be used to understand how men and women use their talents and economic opportunities to achieve their desired goals (TheWorldBank 2011, 150). Men and women from different countries differ in their ability to make effective decisions in different areas of activity, and women are often relatively weak in comparison to men. In transnational marriages, the expression of women's agency often involves the ability to control of resources (their ability to obtain and control income; to own, use and handle material assets); their ability to move freely (women's ability to move freely and choose to live home or outside); decision-making ability to form a family (women's ability of a woman to decide when to marry, who to marry, how many children to have, and when to divorce); the ability to avoid violence (TheWorldBank 2011, 150). In other words, agency is a vital factor in analyzing how, given certain social constraints, women actively decide to participate in transnational marriage, how they negotiate their relationships with their husbands, husbands' families in receiving society and their own families and communities in sending society, and then how they rebuild their subjectivity (Jones and Hsiu-hua 2008, 20-21). In earlier studies of transnational marriages in Asia, "mail-order brides" were often regarded as victims who were vulnerable in their marriages (Constable 2005, 2) or as opportunists who married just to get better living conditions (Kim 2013, 17). These binary options often

ignore a range of types of female agency in transnational marriage. In addition, some scholars focus on the vulnerability of female migrants in transnational marriages, and link it to spouse domestic violence with little female agency.

Using the notion of agency to interpret transnational marriage will provide a theoretical basis for understanding China-Myanmar transnational marriages being examined here. Like transnational marriages in other Asian countries, the stereotype of "Burmese brides" as victims of commercial marriage and human trafficking is widespread. Media reports often portray all such women as having lost their freedom or as lacking agency or as having no rights, opportunity or ability to express their free will in their marriages. Based on the life-course stories I have collected from Burmese brides, however, it seems clear that they showed some degree of agency, even in commercial marriages, which are now considered illegal. Burmese brides still have an ability to make decisions following their free will. For example, they chose to participate in the process of marriage voluntarily for various reasons.

The lived practices of China-Myanmar transnational marriage are diverse, and this diversity comes from different degrees of Burmese brides' agency in their marriages. This diverse starting point could lead to a wide array of marriage types — from forced marriage to commercial marriage to voluntary marriage. Furthermore, the expression of Burmese brides' agency runs through the whole process of transnational marriage, starting from her decision to consider transnational marriage, to its implementation and completion to her post-marriage life. Agency is an important theoretical tool to interpret how Burmese brides negotiate their relationships with their native family, their communities and society in Myanmar, as well as their relations with their husbands, husbands' families, communities and society in China. Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis will show the varying degrees of agency that influences how Burmese brides practice transnational marriage by describing some mainstream media reports and real experiences of Burmese brides from Yunnan, China.



## Methodology

The main methods used in this thesis consist of qualitative methods. Aside from a literature review, I will use participatory observation, interviews, analysis of official documents, media analysis, and second-hand data analysis in the thesis.

### 1. Field work.

This thesis is based mainly on qualitative data gathered through three fieldwork trips to Yunnan, China in 2018 and 2019. To obtain relevant first-hand survey materials and get the real Burmese brides' transnational marriage experiences, field work is a basic research method.

In this thesis, Ruili City in Dehong prefecture and Tengchong City in Baoshan prefecture of Yunnan are the main areas of my field work, conducted in three trips made during 2018 to 2019. The Myanmar-Yunnan border is 1997 kilometers long, of which the northern part is mostly Plateau, snow mountains and rivers, making it hard to cross the border; while Baoshan City and Dehong Prefecture belong to the central and southern part, where the latitude and longitude are low, the terrain is relatively flat and the flow of rivers is not so turbulent. This allows people along the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier in these areas to have closer contacts in those two places.

As a Yunnan native, I am familiar with the social environment of Yunnan province and I have strong interpersonal connections in Yunnan. After determining the locations of the field work, I contacted several "Burmese brides" based on suggestions made by my friends, classmates, parents and teachers. Because of this way of recommendation, my interviewees have a high degree of trust in me, and they actively helped me complete my research – not only with my interviews, but also willing to let me join some of their social life.

I completed three field trips to Yunnan in 2018 and 2019. After completing my first field trip, I established good relations with several "Burmese brides", who voluntarily introduced me to other "Burmese brides", who were mainly my

interviewees of second field trip. It must be noted that the second survey was mainly done by video calls. Since the recommended "Burmese bride" could use smartphones, I could collect as much data as possible even though I was still in school. In addition, because I got their social contact information, I have been able to study their social life network construction after marriage in China by observing and analyzing their worlds and movement which were posted on their own social media. The third survey was based on questions that were found in the first and second surveys. The results of interviews with "Burmese Brides" who married in urban areas and "Burmese Brides" who married in rural areas were very different. In the first and second surveys, most "Burmese brides" came from city center. By comparison, it was found that the living conditions and legal documents holding status of "Burmese brides" from rural areas are more complicated than other brides. In order to better understand this issue, "Burmese brides" from the rural areas were part of the third survey. But since their homes are in remote areas, transportation is inconvenient. Sometimes it required a 3-4 hour walk to arrive after long-time driving, so only three women were visited in this week-long survey. Details of three surveys are as follows:

Research Completion Table			
Order	Time	location	number
First time	6/7/2018-20/7/2018	Urban area of Tengchong, Baoshan	3
		Rural area of Tengchong, Baoshan	1
		Urban area of Ruili, Dehong	6
		Rural area of Ruili, Dehong	4
Second time	26/8/2018-6/9/2018	Urban area of Tengchong, Baoshan	3
Third time	10/2/2019-15/2/2019	Rural area of Tengchong, Baoshan	3

This table shows a total of 20 interviewees, consisting of 10 from Baoshan, 10 from Dehong; 12 from urban areas, 8 from rural areas.

This thesis did four different types of fieldwork: viewing living conditions, participant observation, interviews and collection of legal documents and government data. Beyond viewing the ways and situations of the Burmese brides' lives, I have also

used observation method and interview method. The interviewed Burmese brides come from three different ethnic groups: Jingpo, Lisu and Han. I also went to Dehong and Baoshan civil affairs agencies to interview some government staff about China-Myanmar transnational marriages and learned more of the detailed legal process and procedures required to get the transnational marriages officially recognized, including the legal requirements for registering legal transnational marriages in China and the conditions for obtaining residence certificates in China.

**a. Observing living situations.**

This basic observation method allowed me to gain direct information by observing only with myself implementing the process as an observer. These observations were mainly used to understand the living situations of the Burmese brides, such as their living environment, working environment, their family relations, interpersonal relationships, and so on.

**b. Participant observation.**

An important part of this thesis concerns the description of the living pattern of Burmese brides in Myanmar and how they build social networks in China. This gave me a better understanding of their social life in China, I used the participant observation method. First, with their consent, I participated in their social life including attending parties, work, shopping, etc. during the interview; second, I still keep in touch with them by their social media channels, such as WeChat, QQ, Weibo, and Facebook, and through observing their dynamics messages in these media to understand their daily life.

**c. Interview method.**

This method is a vital research method for this thesis. Marriage experience of most Burmese brides in this thesis was acquired through interviews. I mainly use the combination of Semi-structured interview and in-depth interview. Since I have an initial and approximate problem framework about my study before the interview, I could not guarantee the problem framework could cover all the respondents' answers

and situations from interviewees, therefore, semi-structured interviews provided a relatively appropriate method. In addition, some Burmese brides could only cooperate with me to complete one-off interviews due to their housework, work, etc.; but some of them are accommodating and willing to conduct in-depth interviews with me, so that I can better understand their lives and situations.

Moreover, during the interview process, most of my interviewees had migrated to China for more than a year, and so they were able to speak the Yunnan dialect. Some of them belong to ethnic Chinese and they learned Chinese and Burmese from childhood, so that they are proficient in Mandarin and the Yunnan dialect. So, most of my interviews were conducted in the Yunnan dialect or in Mandarin. For a few who were from a transnational ethnic minority group and were not proficient in Mandarin and Yunnan dialect, I invited their Chinese family or friends to act as translators to help me do the interview.

To records the interviews, I made audio and video recordings and took photos with my helper after obtaining their consent. I also took interview notes. After the interview, I would organize the interview notes and recordings and write detailed interview contents.

#### **d. Collection of legal documents and government data.**

To supplement these sources, I also went to local government departments to talk with relevant civil affairs departments to seek the data support and legal documents from government departments since those closely related to the legal construction of "Burmese Brides". This provided me access to documents like the border people's entry-exit permit, temporary residence permit, marriage certificate, single status certificate, and so on.

#### **2. Media analysis method.**

To better understand the practices of transnational marriage in China and Myanmar, this thesis will also analyze mass media and social media materials.

Drawing on materials from mainstream news and television interview shows, online magazines and so on permits me to gain broader perspectives on the lived practices of working practices of marriages to Burmese brides and also their public or official views of them, since during interviews done with families in similar transnational marriages, they are often reluctant to talk about the whole process of how their marriage were done such as the use of intermediaries, bride prices, bride's mobile land routes, etc. So mainstream news media and television interview shows will provide a fuller picture of the process of trafficking and trade marriage. I also use primary documents collected in my surveys.

### **3. Second-hand data analysis method.**

This method uses data collected or analyzed by other scholars or organizations that are relevant to my project. Because I am a graduate student studying in a non-Chinese university, it is often hard to get relevant data from Chinese government agencies and civil affairs departments on transnational marriages between China and Myanmar, since they view these data as national secrets. Also, language barriers and the lack of recent national statistics make it hard to find details on transnational marriages from the Myanmar side. So some of the data in this thesis could only be based on previous research that could obtain the relatively complete data from the official sources or piecemeal research done by NGOs or other smaller organizations. The collation and summary of relevant literature from the previous research results in this field to obtain the support of theories and research methods; then, discover inadequacies or blanks among those existing studies to find the direction of this thesis.

### **Significance**

The thesis provides better understanding of the reasons that women from Myanmar marry men in Yunnan, China while destigmatizing their negative image as “Burmese brides.”

By studying women from Myanmar who marry Chinese men in Yunnan, this thesis will create a richer and fuller understanding of China-Myanmar transnational

marriages, different from what is normally understood as “Burmese brides”. Seeing these marriages as forms of transnational marriage migration will permit multi-dimensional analyses of their ties to inter-state relations and the diverse lived practices that reflect changing pattern of these brides' lives in both Myanmar and China. This study will correct some stereotypes or one-sided understandings of “Burmese brides” that are prevalent in the public. While human trafficking and commercial marriage are two types of China-Myanmar transnational marriage, they are not the whole story. Voluntary marriages formed out of free love are also common in these borderland areas.

This thesis aims to re-interpret the types of transnational marriages occurring between China and Myanmar from several perspectives. Firstly, it will provide a new perspective that views China-Myanmar transnational marriages in relation to gendered migration. Secondly, it will focus not only the interaction between marriage migration and the society of the receiving country, but also the interaction between marriage migration and sending country. Finally, I hope that through the analysis of media materials and the first-hand data collected from field work, it can give a more real and comprehensive image of “Burmese Brides” with less prejudice, misunderstanding and stigma.

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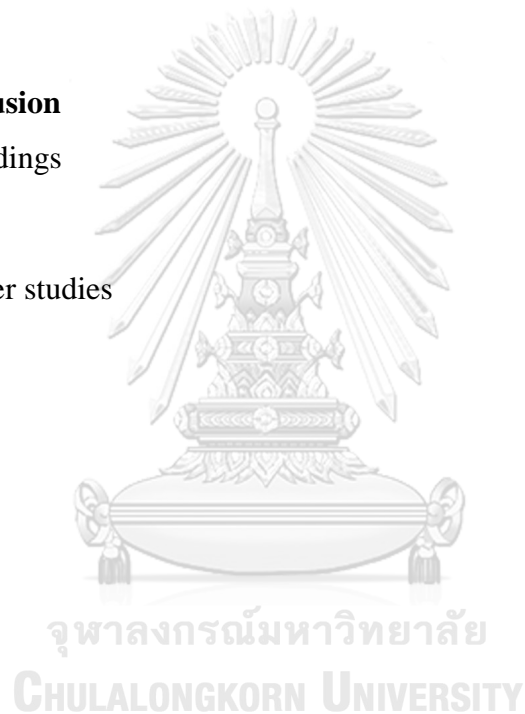
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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In February 2018, I returned to my hometown in Yongping County of Dali Prefecture in Yunnan, China. Fresh news about men from six local families taking Burmese women as wives – often called “Burmese brides” – was widespread. Although my home is not on the Myanmar-Chinese border, it is near Baoshan province which does border Myanmar. One of my Muslim local friends told me that one of the six men who had married a “Burmese bride” lived in her village. He was almost 45 years old and since he could not find a suitable spouse in the area, he had heard from a go-between that he could go to Ruili and find a “Burmese bride” for a low bride price. Soon after he met the Burmese woman in Ruili, they decided to live together and the man gave the marriage broker 2000 RMB [≈ \$288 US] and with the help of the intermediary, he brought home his “Burmese bride” even though she had no identity documents. The new couple got along well, living without friction, despite their different languages, religions, culture and nationalities. They have maintained a stable marriage relationship for more than ten months without marriage certificate.

This incident raised many questions. To start with, since transnational – also called “cross-border” – marriage was new in my hometown, I wondered why this woman from Myanmar wanted to marry a man in China whom she did not know. How did the woman enter China? Who were the brokers? How did the man find the broker? How did he select a woman? Why does this bride have no valid identity document? How do relevant law enforcement agencies or government deal with this type of situation? How is the life of the Burmese brides adapted after marriage? How common is this type of cross-border marriage?

Beyond being a recent phenomenon in Yunnan, “Burmese brides” are also a common stereotype seen in various mass media. A quick Google search of the term “Burmese brides” produces thousands of results that link this term to forced marriages

and human trafficking related to China. National residents, whether from China or Myanmar or other countries, who are rarely familiar with local conditions are likely to pick up on these media views. This is understandable since national residents are often unaware that the media reports reflect incomplete information from limited sources. I spoke with my Myanmar classmate, Lin Lin Kyi about this issue.

*Me: Lin, do you know that there are a lot of voluntary love-based cross-border marriages in the border areas between China and Myanmar?*

*She was very surprised to say: really? I have no ideas about this. However, I often read from websites and newspapers that our women are usually forced to marry Chinese men, such as when they are being cheated or being trafficked.*

Lin Lin Kyi is from Rakhine State in western Myanmar, far from the China-Myanmar border, and she has not been there. Her knowledge of “Burmese brides” comes from Myanmar media reports. Myanmar is a country that is rightly critical of issues such as human trafficking, especially its NGOs and civil society organizations.

Who are these women from Myanmar who marry men in China and how can we understand them? I started to see that the “Burmese brides” in media reports, like the views of governments and NGO reports and in much academic literature, were more prevalent than before and also that they were an issue of concern to many countries and to the international community. These views often differed from the local understandings of Myanmar women who married men in Yunnan. Both showed it was a growing trend with diverse sources and consequences. It was a phenomenon that is expanding beyond border areas into inland areas and coastal areas of China. The trend challenges the social management and institutions of both Myanmar and China and tests the relations of the two countries. The problems in Myanmar-China transnational marriage are often tied to human trafficking, mercenary marriage, issues in the legal recognition of transnational marriages, the fragile social status of women and their children in transnational marriages, among other things. One aspect that is

often missing here is that of the women themselves. So choosing to focus on the decision making powers of women may have some practical significance, too.

Many of the media representations and common views of women from Myanmar who marry men in China tend to be one-sided and often based on a limited and indirect understanding of the situation of these women. This contributes to the stigmatization of these “Burmese brides”. Therefore, this thesis will focus on analyzing the lived forms of China-Myanmar transnational marriages, considering the structural factors shaping this increase in relation to the degree and types of their choices in marrying of these Myanmar women. Such a perspective will produce a more comprehensive perspective of the phenomenon. It will also show that human trafficking is only one of the lived forms of transnational marriages on the China-Myanmar frontier, and does not constitute the majority. More common are types of voluntary and autonomous transnational marriages, where Myanmar women choose who, where, when and how they will marry. Since commercial factors have become more common, they will also be considered, too. The aim is to provide a fuller and richer understanding of transnational marriages involving Myanmar women from their point of view.

## **1.2 Problem Statement and Thesis Objectives**

This thesis seeks to explain the expansion of “Burmese brides” in southwestern Yunnan province in China since 2000. It will analyze the growing numbers of these “Burmese brides” in this part of Yunnan as a type of transnational marriage migration between Myanmar women and men in China by using structural and agency-centered approaches. It will argue that structural factors produce a field of life opportunities for Myanmar women to exercise their agency in marriage, thus contributing to the expansion of China-Myanmar transnational marriages. From a structural perspective, the growing numbers of transnational marriages on the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier will be linked to the feminization of migration, ethnic ties in this border area,

socioeconomic disparities, gender imbalance issues on the border and the marriage squeeze in China, the civil war and the persecution of AIDS and drugs in northern Myanmar, and the constraints of national marriage laws and immigration policies in China and Myanmar. More importantly, however, this thesis will show how many Myanmar women work within these structural constraints, making choices and decisions about their marriage – what sociologists call exercising their “agency” – to improve their marriage opportunities, enhancing their individual socioeconomic choices by marrying Chinese men in Yunnan, China. Women’s agency in marriage matters, since recent data shows that most (more than 60%) of these “Burmese brides” exercise their “agency” or decision-making powers in marrying men in Yunnan, but most research has neglected this majority. Since not all women from Myanmar have the power to make choices about their marriages, however, the thesis will situate the decision-making powers of Myanmar women on a spectrum of choice spanning voluntary, commercial and forced marriage to better understand the “Burmese brides” phenomenon.

This thesis has three main objectives. First it aims to identify the reasons for the growth of transnational marriages between women from Myanmar with men in border areas of Yunnan, China within the constraints of changing legal framework of China-Myanmar transnational marriages shaped by evolving national policies, laws, and regulations. Secondly, it will interpret the changing transnational marriage patterns and practices of Myanmar women on the China-Myanmar frontier linking them to their decision-making powers or “agency”. Finally, it will uncover the reasons that Myanmar women choose to marry men in Yunnan.

This thesis will mainly use qualitative anthropological methods to obtain first-hand information about “Burmese brides” in the border areas through site visits, interviews, observations and documents and records from field work. It will contextualize and analyze the narratives and experience of these women in relation to the concept of “agency”. To better make sense of the structural or macro reasons for

this increase, I will emphasize the power of women's decision-making power or “agency” to understand the reasons for their marriage to men in Yunnan. This is important since most women who marry on the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier marry Chinese men autonomously, often using their expanded access to social network before and after their marriages.

### **1.3 Literature Review on Transnational Marriage in China and Myanmar**

To understand the Burmese bride phenomenon, I will use the concept of “transnational marriage”. This concept is connected to two other common notions, namely “cross-border marriage” and “international marriage”. It is important to define these concepts in the concept of previous research. Transnational marriage is essentially a kind of migration, where the migration is takes place within the framework of marriage. By reviewing previous research on transnational marriage between other countries, I will learn some research ideas, directions and methods for this thesis. Myanmar and China are both countries in Asia so reviewing research on transnational marriage in Asia will be especially relevant. After considering this topic in the Asian region, I will focus on research on transnational marriage in China and Myanmar.

#### **1.3.1 Concept Definition**

Earlier researchers often used the term “cross-border marriage” while more recent scholars tend to use the terms “transnational marriages” and “international marriages”. In fact, the difference between these terms is not always clear. Sometimes, they are used together, with the same basic meaning of a marriage concluded by two people from different countries. But in their usage, the terms may have subtle differences. Melody Chia-wen Lu has given distinguished the terms “cross-border and transnational marriage” arguing that “cross-border marriage” emphasizes “border(s)” which could be those shaped by the geography, race, gender, class and culture of the marriage migrant receiving country. This research focuses on demographic and social problems that

“cross borders” – that is, problem that marriages cause to receiving countries. By contrast, she argues that “transnational marriage” emphasizes both the marriage migrant receiving country and the migrant sending country. The term is often used to study transnational networks and spaces created by marriage migrants themselves, as well as the economic, cultural, and social practices of people in both the receiving and sending countries (2017, 3). Finally, while “international marriage” tends to focus more on “internal” or “domestic” matters, its scope is often broader, since it emphasizes two or more than two nations. Sometimes “international” is used to avoid material forms of prejudice or discrimination against women who are marriage migrants or to keep from needing to point out the migrant’s nationality, gender, etc.

Because the theoretical focus of this thesis is based on transnational theories and based on issues in both the receiving countries and the sending countries, I will normally use term “transnational marriage”, but I still sometimes use the other two terms when drawing on the research of those who use these other two terms. Therefore, all three terms may appear in this thesis, with similar meanings.

### **1.3.2 The Feminization of Global Migration**

The analysis of migration trends from scholars Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller is quite representative. They believe that the time the late 20th century to the present started an “era of international migration” whose main trends are globalization, acceleration, diversification and feminization (2014, 16-17). Research by the Indian scholar Meenakshi Thapan notes that people from developing countries have been looking for jobs in developed countries since the 20th century. Earlier in the century most migrants were men, while women were mostly family members who accompanied men and were considered as their followers. After the 1960s however, women migrant became more common as a key autonomous form of migration, and these women migrants no longer follow men's mobility patterns as their appendages (Wan, Zhu, and Tang 2013, 107). The United Nations International Immigration

Report showed that since 1960, the number of female immigrants has increased globally, so that since 2006 women constituted more than half of the total number of migrants. From a regional perspective, the proportion of women migrants in Southeast Asia has also exceeded half, and the percentage of female migrants continues to increase (Wan, Zhu, and Tang 2013, 107). With the feminization of global migration established, transnational marriages have also increased. As a result of female marriage migration, along with labor migration has attracted the attention of scholars from many countries and regions. In Asia and Southeast Asia, female transnational marriage migration has become a main focus of scholars. Moreover, research on female transnational marriage migration has gradually gained a "gendered" perspective.

### **1.3.3 Transnational Marriage Migration in Asia**

In general, the rise of transnational marriages in Asia and Southeast Asia was researched since the 1980s, but the phenomenon existed even earlier. Most of it centered on Asian women migrating to Western countries through or for marriage. At the end of World War II, many migrants moved from Japan to the United States. Later, many single Japanese women sent their photos to Japanese men who settled in the United States to become partners in this way. In 1945, the US government enacted the 1945 War Brides Act to help these women immigrate to the United States. Therefore, these women are also known as "picture brides" (Chen 2018, 45). Since the 1970s, female marriage immigrants have come to our attention with a novel word "mail-order brides". "mail-order brides" is a kind of practice form of cross-border marriage. It is facilitated by cross-border intermediaries operating a series of medias (network, newspapers, etc.), at the same times, mainly with Asian women and Western men as the supply and demand side. The brides are mainly from Southeast Asian countries, Eastern Europe and other less developed countries, while men are mainly from the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, Japan and other developed countries (Wan, Zhu, and Tang 2013, 107). Since marriage migrations are often

associated with gender, culture, class, etc. (Mann and Grimes 2001, 3-22), these brides are considered to be vulnerable and unprotected by law in the process of cross-border migration. Cross-border marriage migration is a kind of geographical migration, which usually contacted with cultural practice of "patrilocal". This patrilocal postmarital residence pattern means that the bride usually transfers from her birthplace and lives in her husband's home with in-laws after marriage. This pattern demonstrates that the brides lack of their agency because they must obey the marriage arrangements. But in the cases of scholar Nicole Constable, brides actually have their own power of choice and free will for marriage (Constable 2005). The connection between cross border marriage and class is embodied in a kind of gender mobility form called "Hypergamy". It means marriage flows usually involve brides moving from less developed countries or regions to more developed countries or regions (Chen and Yang 2016, 107). Such marriages are often considered a strategy for women to improve their economic and social status.

Subsequently, cross-border marriage migration within Asia also received further attention, on account of the rise of women's cross-border marriages also received responses within Asia. The number of cross-border marriages in Asia is increasing and dominated by women. As well, these marriages mainly include men from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as receiving countries of immigrants, and women from the Philippines, mainland of China, Vietnam, and Indonesia as sending countries (Chen and Yang 2016, 109). In the volume of scholars Melody Chia-Wen Lu and Wen-Shan Yang describe the demographic patterns of cross-border marriage immigrants in Asia from demographic features in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, emphasizing social life conditions in the sending countries and wifehood and social network construction in the receiving countries (Lu and Yang 2010). Scholars Nicola Piper and Sohoon Lee analyze the relationship between Asian marriage migrants' gender and migrant precarity from various angles. It mainly includes the relationship between the various precarities faced by female immigrants and the social economy



and law of the country, then, illustrate the changes in family patterns and social reproduction within marriage migration, etc. (2016, 473-493). The scholars Chinsung Chung, Keuntae Kim and Nicola Piper interpret cross-border marriage migration in Southeast Asia from the perspective of "migration-development nexus". It depicts that the institution of the family makes a huge influence on Southeast Asia cross-border marriage, but marriage migration is beyond institution of the family, which relates to migration-development nexus. This affects the governance of global migration, policies of countries and international organizations to promote and better understand migration flows (2016, 463-472). Some scholars focus on the negative phenomena in cross-border marriage migration, such as human trafficking, commercial marriage, and cross-border marriage intermediary problems. For example, scholars Oksana Yakushko and Indhushree Rajan compared human trafficking with "mail-order brides" in their study, and introduced the role of international marriage agencies in promoting the relationship between men and women in two countries (2016, 190-206). On the contrary, scholar Melody Chia-Wen Lu, based on her studying the case of commercially arranged marriages between Taiwanese men and women from mainland of China and Southeast Asia, and matchmaking or marriage brokerage, questions the argument that commercial arranged marriages are often seen as a form of women trafficking or mail-order brides (2005, 275-303).

#### **1.3.4 China-Myanmar cross-border marriage**

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in mainland China, the economy of mainland China has developed very well. The role of mainland China in the process of cross-border marriage migration has become a receiving country toward to Southeast Asian countries from traditional sending country. With the increasing cross-border marriage in the border areas between China and Southeast Asian countries, there are many issues and phenomena worthy of academic attention, and the "Burmese brides" phenomenon related to cross-border marriage is one of them. At present, there is not much literature on the study of "Burma brides" phenomenon or

China-Myanmar transnational marriages. But Chinese and Western scholars have also expounded their views from different angles.

From the perspective of Anthropology and ethnology, many scholars have expounded on the history, causes, current situation and existing problems of cross-border marriage in China and Southeast Asian countries. Elena Barabantseva states that in Yao villages on the Sino-Vietnamese border, traditional ethnic marriages become cross-border marriages because of country-building and the demarcation of borders. Then, because of China's population security problems and the establishment of border immigration management system, the traditional cross-border marriage has changed from common (*shishi*) marriage to illegal (undocumented) marriage (2015, 352-368). Similarly, scholar Mo Li describes present situation of the traditional transnational inter-ethnic marriage from two transnational ethnic groups in the China-Myanmar border areas: Dai people and Jingpo People. Meanwhile, Mo Li introduces some issues of the social and cultural adaptation of Burmese wives who are within those marriage (2013, 122). Scholar Yang Wenyi analyses the history, current situation and causes of cross-border marriage in border areas from the perspectives of geography, ethnicity and cultural similarity (2011, 47-50). With the practice of inter-ethnic marriage, the traditional mode of inter-ethnic cross-marriage began to change and showed a trend towards cross-ethnic marriage. In Chinese scholar Xiaoyan Wang's study pointed out that the reforms in the rural social life and the changes in the marriage market made the migration and communication of the border people spread better, which led to the initial transnational marriage no longer restricted by regional and ethnic groups (2014, 56).

From the perspective of sociology, scholars mainly describe the social identity, social adaptation, health problems, social protection system and children' education of those "Southeast Asia brides". Scholar Huang Kai and Long Yalan focus on the social identity issues to analyze the problem of group identity, national identity in transnational marriage, and legal dilemma faced by transnational marriage and think

about how to perfect the laws and regulations of transnational marriage (2017, 68-76); Scholars Jiafang Yang, Zhang Teng and Hu Anyan research on the prevention of HIV and HIV infectious status in Burmese brides issue (2013, 320-322); Scholar Shujuan Zhao is concerned about the legal status and environmental problems of the children of Burmese brides in China (2013, 150-151);

From the perspective of economics, scholars mainly discuss the economic gaps between China and neighboring countries of Southeast Asia, which is one of the motivations for the increase of China-Myanmar cross-border marriages. In their survey, scholars Ying Mei and Hongjun Li found that the Myanmar brides live in remote areas with poor transportation and economic backwardness, hence they regard marriage as a way to change their economic and social status (2015, 30).

From the perspective of laws, scholars mainly analyze the illegality of cross-border marriages and propose solutions, including illegal marriage and human trafficking. The related laws cover China's marriage law, nationality law, entry and exit management law and criminal law, Myanmar's relevant human rights laws and the UN's anti-human trafficking laws. American scholar Erin M. Kamler thinks the Kachin conflict led a result that women were trafficked to Yunnan province of China (2015, 1-39). Chinese scholars Quanbao Jiang, Li Ying and Spain scholar Jesús J. Sánchez Barricarte elaborate the idea that women in neighboring countries were trafficked to China from the point of view of gender imbalance in China (2013, 1-26).

From the perspective of international relations, scholars mainly focus on attitudes and countermeasures for cross-border marriages between relevant countries. Chinese scholar Zhongyi Liu thinks that "the Brides from Southeast Asia" would make some negative impacts on China's security (2013, 19-27); Therefore, the implementation of certain management policies can reduce the impact of such marriages on national security. Scholar Xianghua Hou studies about illegal marriage immigration situations under the national security, population movements, national

sovereignties (2012, 59-63). Starting from the international relations between China and Myanmar, Zhengxue Yue explored the characteristics, causes and illegal social problems brought by illegal marriage migration, and also proposed management opinions on illegal cross-border marriage migration (2014, 24). In summary, these documents are very important and provide a very large guiding role for my thesis. But at the same time, the literature on cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar is still blank, so it also gives me space to write more about this topic: First of all, we can see that in the field of cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar, most of the literature focuses on China as a receiving country to discuss the motives, status quo and social problems of Myanmar women as brides. While ignoring under the background of the cross-border marriage in Asia, China is a traditional female immigrant sending country. One of the reasons for the formation of China-Myanmar cross-border marriages is the result of the role transformation of China's status from sending country to receiving country. Moreover, these studies also overlook the nature of cross-border marriage as an act of immigration, lack theoretical support, rarely combined with cross-border marriage and immigration theory to discuss. So putting the cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar in the context of global and Asian marriage migration is very necessary to discuss.

Secondly, most of the current studies on cross-border marriage migration and state discourse in China and Myanmar remain in the stability of these marriages to Chinese society, China's population security and China's border management, and are rarely discussed from the sending country of Myanmar.

Thirdly, the lived practice of cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar has not been fully understood. Due to the sharp increase in such marriages, China's relevant laws and systems are relatively backward, and it is unable to cope with the social problems arising from the surge in time. The result is the illegal state of such marriages. Coupled with the uncoordinated gender ratio of China's domestic

population, the lack of women in rural areas of China, the increase in the number of female trafficking in Myanmar, and the selective coverage of the media, which shaped the public's stereotype of the Burmese bride that was forced to marry the Chinese man or was a vulnerable, helpless party in a cross-border marriage. However, in fact, forced marriage is only a kind of practice in cross-border marriage. In the border areas, free marriage is common. Burmese brides are not fragile and helpless. Their cross-border marriages were the result of their active initiative in agency. Therefore, it is very necessary to understand more about the lived practices of cross-border marriage between China and Myanmar.

Finally, some studies describe the life of Burmese brides in China from a sociological perspective, including their identity, social adaptation, health issues, social security, and the education of their children. But this does not fully explain their multiple roles in China as worker, mother, daughter in law, etc. Beside, we also should pay more attention to their life in Myanmar, in order to better understand the differences of life in two countries (Those differences can make them willing to marry to China.). Therefore, their life in Myanmar and the womanhood in China should be understood.

#### **1.4 A Brief Introduction to the “Burmese Brides” Phenomenon in Yunnan**

Over the past two decades, the number of transnational marriages between China and Myanmar has been growing in Yunnan province. This “Burmese brides” phenomenon has aroused widespread concern in Chinese, Myanmar and the international community. This social phenomenon of a transnational migrant group—Myanmar women who marry Chinese men—is growing and shows some regular characteristics, while having some social impact. The increase in transnational marriages between China and Myanmar is noticeable. Dehong prefecture in southwestern Yunnan province shares a border with Myanmar on the south, west and northwest. It has four national points of entry into Myanmar: Ruili, Wanding,

Yingjiang and Zhangfeng. An incomplete survey by Chinese scholars of Dehong, shows that until 2012, there were 1865 China-Myanmar transnational marriages longer than 10 years, while the number of marriages less than 10 years grew to 6751 (Chen and Yang 2016, 108). The survey shows that almost all of the transnational marriages were between Myanmar women and Chinese men. Outside Dehong prefecture, other data has showed that other border cities in Yunnan province show a similar pattern. That is to say, the growing numbers of transnational marriage in China and Myanmar mainly consist of Myanmar women marrying men in China. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, "Burmese brides" are often reported on in China, Myanmar and other foreign media since they are increasingly involved in negative transnational issues like illegal entry, human trafficking, commercial marriage, forced marriage and so on, which reflects the negative aspects of the "Burmese brides" phenomenon and tends to stigmatize the women. Since China, Myanmar and the international community (such as the UN) has enacted a series of laws and policies to avoid human trafficking and other social problems, "Burmese brides" become more recognized, especially in China. This has cemented the impression that the "Burmese brides" are and could only have been tied to illegal activities.

"Burmese brides" are of concern not only because of the overall increase in their number, but also because of the expanding geographical and ethnic scope of their marriages. From same ethnic marriages to non-same ethnic group marriages; from Yunnan border areas to non-border areas in China's inland and coastal areas. First, on opposite sides of the China-Myanmar border inhabited by many multinational ethnic minorities, these ethnic minorities, in history, are the same ethnic groups, so there will be the same language, culture, etc., early transnational marriages took place among these ethnic groups. Later, Myanmar women's criteria for spouse selection were no longer limited to same ethnic Chinese men, but also included other ethnic groups, like Han people in China. Secondly, from the plentiful reports of the authoritative media in the mainland and coastal areas of China, more and more "Myanmar brides" were found

in Yunnan non-border places, China's inland and coastal areas, no longer confined to the Yunnan border areas.

In short, the “Burmese brides” phenomenon has been shaped by the growing numbers of marriages, together with the unidirectional gender mobility, the widening range of spouse selection and the view of their activity as illegal shaped by media reports, laws or policies.

### **1.5 Marriage Migration in Asia: Toward a Theoretical Framework for Analysis**

Transnational marriage is a type of international migration so it is necessary to understand relevant theories of migration. Theories of international migration originated from the West, and Western scholars made significant contributions to the establishment of the international immigration theory system. Early on, according to immigration researcher Stephen Castles, he believed that international immigration theory should be divided into two categories: functionalist paradigm and historical-structural paradigm (2014, 27). Functionalist paradigm mainly includes push-pull theory and neoclassical economic theory. Historical-structural paradigm mainly contains dual/segmented labor market theories and World systems theory. As the number of international immigrants continues to grow, the motivations and external conditions of immigration become more and more complicated. Scholars started to question the applicability of early immigration theories, and then propose some modern and new immigration theories, such as new economics of migration theory, transnationalism theory, immigration system theory, cumulative causation theory, social network theory and so on. Among them, two more suitable and representative theories are used in this thesis:

***Push-pull theory.*** The theory originated in the “Push-pull model” that proposed by E.G. Ravenstein in the 19th century when he was studying the population migration. According to the theory, the factors that determine the emergence of migration are the “push” factors from the original residential place and the “pull” factors from the

immigration destination place; the “push” factors are generally negative, and the “pull” factors are usually positive (Lee 1966, 47-57). This theory is the most basic theory among the theories of international migration, but will be helpful in analyzing the causes of China-Myanmar transnational marriages in the fourth chapter. At the macro level, the difference in basic national conditions within the two countries will result in the mobility of marriage. There are some factors in the immigrants sending country that push people to migrate outwards; similarly, there are also some factors in immigrants receiving countries to attract immigrants to settle down.

***Transnationalism theory.*** This theory is representative of emerging theories and is based on anthropology. The theory holds that the expansion of globalization promotes the interweaving of communication, transportation and trade, thus strengthens the mobility of immigrants. In addition, Transnationalism believes that immigrants cross national borders and establish social fields between their place of origin and their immigration destinations, which directly leads to social, cultural, economic and political changes in the sending and receiving countries, and tests the formulation of relevant national immigration policies (Chen 2018, 65-66). The theory will go through the full text, especially in the chapter 5 on the analysis and collation of the results of the Burmese brides, through the support of transnationalism theory, from the construction of the social network of the Burmese bride in the receiving country and the survival pattern in the sending country to do a contextualization analysis.

Secondly, in the vast majority of English literature on transnational marriage in Asia, gender migration theory is a universal and mainstream theoretical support. At present, there are very few literature putting the gendered research theory in application of China-Myanmar transnational marriage research. Therefore, we will analyze the similarities and differences between China-Myanmar transnational marriage and Asian transnational marriage in the light of the theory of gendered studies.



Thirdly, transnationalism has been widely used in feminization and gendered studies. Since transnationalism could be used to distinguish individual actor from the state through being textured and contextual, the theoretical framework of transnationalism would also pay more attention to the agency of the actor in the context of geographic, historical and political background (Kim 2013, 12).

Agency interacts with gender and marriage in multiple ways. The World Bank pointed out in its 2012 report that agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups make effective choices and translate those choices into desired outcomes. It can be used to understand how female and male uses their talents and economic opportunities to achieve desired results (The World Bank 2011, 150). Female and male from different countries differs in their ability to make effective decisions in different areas, and women are often relatively weak. In the field of transnational marriage, the expression of female agency often involves the ability to control of resources (women's ability to obtain and control income; to own, use and handle material assets); the ability to move freely (women's ability to move freely and choose to live home or outside); Decision-making ability to form a family (women's ability of a woman to decide when to marry, who to marry, how many children to have, and when to divorce); The ability to avoid violence (The World Bank 2011, 150). In other words, the agency is a vital factor in the analysis of how, within certain social constraints, women actively decide to participate in transnational marriage, how they negotiate their relationships with their husbands, husbands' families in receiving society and their own families and communities in sending society, and then how they rebuild their subjectivity (Jones and Shen 2008, 20-21). For example, in earlier studies of transnational marriages in Asia, "mail-order brides" were often regarded as the victimized and vulnerable side of such marriages (Constable 2005, 2) or the opportunist who married just to get better living conditions (Kim 2013, 17). These stereotypes usually ignore the female agency in transnational marriages. In addition, some scholars focus on the vulnerability of female immigrants in transnational

marriages, and associate the theme of spouse domestic violence with the expression of female agency.

The application of the sociological concept of agency to understand transnational marriage will provide a theoretical basis for the analyzing China-Myanmar transnational marriage. Like transnational marriages in other Asian countries, the stereotype that "Burmese brides" as victims of commercial marriage and human trafficking is widespread. They are believed to have lost their freedom or to lack agency in these marriages without rights, opportunities and abilities to express their free will. However, based on the experiences and stories I have collected from Myanmar women who have married men in Yunnan, they show that even in commercialized forms of marriage, which are currently considered illegal, Burmese brides still have powers to make decisions followed their free will. They chose to participate in the process of marriage voluntarily. The lived practices of China-Myanmar transnational marriage are diverse. The diversity comes from different degrees of Burmese brides' ability to express agency in their marriages, which could make their marriage to be different types: from forced marriage to commercial marriage to voluntary marriage. Furthermore, the expression of Burmese brides' agency runs through the whole process of transnational marriage, including from her decision to join transnational marriage, implementation and completion of transnational marriage to their post-marriage life. Agency is thus an important perspective to understand how Burmese brides negotiate their relationships with their native family, community and society in Myanmar and their husbands, husbands' families, communities and society in China. Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis will show how the degree of agency exercising influences the way that Burmese brides practice transnational marriage by describing some authoritative media reports and real experiences of Burmese brides from Yunnan, China.

## **1.6 Methodology: Observation, Interviews, Media and Legal Analysis**

The main methods used in this thesis consist of qualitative methods. Aside from a literature review, it uses participatory observation, interviews, analysis of official documents, media analysis, and second-hand data analysis.

### **1.6.1 Field work.**

This thesis is based mainly on qualitative data gathered through fieldwork. To obtain relevant first-hand survey materials and get the real Burmese brides' transnational marriage experiences, field work is one of the most basic research methods.

In this thesis, Ruili City in Dehong prefecture and Tengchong City in Baoshan prefecture of Yunnan are the main areas of my field work. The Myanmar-Yunnan border is 1997 kilometers long, of which the northern part is mostly Plateau, snow mountains and rivers, making it hard to cross the border; while Baoshan City and Dehong Prefecture belong to the central and southern part, where the latitude and longitude are low, the terrain is relatively flat and the flow of rivers is not so turbulent. This allows people along the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier in these areas to have closer contacts in those two places.

As a Yunnan native, I am familiar with the social environment of Yunnan Province and I have a strong interpersonal network in Yunnan. After determining the locations of the field work, I contacted several "Burmese brides" based on suggestions made by my friends, classmates, parents and teachers. Because of this way of recommendation, my interviewees have a high degree of trust in me, and they are very active in helping me complete my research - not only with my interviews, but also willing to let me join some of their social life.

I have completed three complete surveys. After completing my first field survey, I established good relations with several "Burmese brides", who volunteered to

introduce me to other "Burmese brides", who were mainly my interviewees of second survey. It must be noted that the second survey was mainly done by video calls; since the recommended "Burmese bride" could use smartphones, I could collect as much data as possible even though I was still in school. In addition, because I got their social contact information, it is useful to study their social life network construction after marriage in China by observing and analyzing their worlds and movement which were posted on their own social media. The third survey was based on questions that were found in the first and second surveys: the results of interviews with "Burmese Brides" who married in urban areas and "Burmese Brides" who married in rural areas were very different. In the first and second surveys, the vast number of "Burmese brides" came from city center. Through comparison, it was found that the living conditions and legal documents holding status of "Burmese brides" from rural areas are more complicated than other brides. In order to better verify this problem, "Burmese brides" from the rural areas were the object of the third survey. But since their homes are located in remote areas, transportation is inconvenient. Sometimes it needed to take 3-4 hours to walk to arrive after long-time driving, so only three women were visited in one-week survey. Details of three surveys are as follow Figure 1:

*Figure 1 Time Table of Fieldwork in Myanmar-Yunnan Frontier*

Research Completion Table			
Order	Time	location	number
First time	6/7/2018-20/7/2018	Urban area of Tengchong, Baoshan	3
		Rural area of Tengchong, Baoshan	1
		Urban area of Ruili, Dehong	6
		Rural area of Ruili, Dehong	4
Second time	26/8/2018-6/9/2018	Urban area of Tengchong, Baoshan	3
Third time	10/2/2019-15/2/2019	Rural area of Tengchong, Baoshan	3

This figure shows the total number of interviewees was 20. Among them, 10 are from Baoshan, 10 from Dehong; 12 from urban area, 8 from rural area.

Thus, this thesis did four different types of fieldwork: viewing living conditions, participant observation, interviews and collection of legal documents and government data. Beyond viewing the ways and situations where the Burmese brides lives I have also used observation method and interview method. The interviewed Burmese brides come from ethnic Jingpo, ethnic Lisu and ethnic Han. In addition, I also went to Dehong and Baoshan civil affairs agencies to interview some government staffs' ideas about China-Myanmar transnational marriages and some detailed legal procedures, such as the legal requirements for registering legal transnational marriages in China and the conditions for obtaining residence certificates in China.

*i. Observing living situations.* This is one kind of the basic observation methods Which I can directly get the information by observing only with myself implementing the process as an observer. This observation way is mainly used to understand the living situation related to the Burmese brides, such as their house environment, working environment, their family relation, interpersonal relationship and so on.

*ii. Participant observation.* An important part of this thesis is about the description of the living pattern of Burmese brides in Myanmar and their construction of social networks in China. Among them, in order to have a better understanding of their social life in China, I choose participant observation method. First, with their consent, I participate in social life with them, including parties, work, shopping, etc. during the interview; second, I keep in touch with them by their social software, such as WeChat, QQ, Weibo, Facebook, etc., and through observing their dynamics messages in their social software to understand their daily life.

*iii. Interview method.* This method is one of the most vital research methods in this thesis. Marriage experience of most Burmese brides in this thesis was acquired through interviews. I mainly use the combination of Semi-structured interview and in-depth interview. Since I have an initial and approximate problem framework about my study before the interview, but I can't guarantee the problem framework could cover

all the respondents' answers and situations from interviewees, therefore, semi-structured interview is a relatively appropriate method. In addition, some Burmese brides can only cooperate with me to complete one-off interviews due to housework, work, etc.; but some of them are accommodating and willing to conduct in-depth interviews with me, so that I can better understand their relevant information.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that during the interview process, most of them have migrated to China for at least or more than one year, and they are able to speak Yunnan dialect; some of them belong to ethnic Chinese. They learn Chinese and Burmese from childhood, so that they are proficient in Mandarin and Yunnan dialect. Therefore, during the interview, I personally talked with them using Yunnan dialect or Mandarin. For a small number of them belong to transnational ethnic minorities who are not proficient in Mandarin and Yunnan dialect, I invite their Chinese family or friends as translators to help me complete the interview.

Regarding the records of the interview process, I took audio and video recordings and photos with my helper after obtaining their consent. In the meantime, I did the interview notes in time. After the interview, I would organize the interview notes and recordings and write detailed interview contents.

#### ***iv. Collection of legal documents and government data.***

As a supplement, my interviewees include not only the subject—Burmese brides, their husbands, relatives and friends, but also local government departments. I went to the relevant civil affairs departments to seek the data support and legal documents from government departments as much as possible. Since those closely related to the legal constructions of "Burmese Brides", such as: border people's entry-exit permit, Temporary residence permit, marriage certificate, single status certificate and so on.

### **1.6.2 Media analysis method**

In order to better understand the practices of transnational marriage in China and Myanmar, this thesis will also use social media materials and also popular mass media, such as those from authoritative news and television interview shows, online magazines and so on. Those materials are particularly useful for describing the lived practices of trade marriages to Burmese brides, because during the interviews process with families in similar transnational marriages, they are often reluctant to talk about the whole process of marriage completion, including intermediaries, bride prices, bride's mobile routes, etc. In those cases, authoritative news and television interviews show will provide a complete sketch of the process of trafficking and trade marriage. I also use primary documents collected in my surveys.

### **1.6.3 Second-hand data analysis method.**

Literally, this method uses the data collected or organized by previous scholars or organizations for relevant analysis. In fact, because I am a graduate student at a non-Chinese university, the relevant Chinese government agencies and civil affairs departments are not willing to provide me with data on transnational marriages between China and Myanmar. They think these data are national secrets. Also, due to language barriers and the lack of national statistics, data on transnational marriages from Myanmar side is rarely available, so some of the data in this thesis could only be based on previous research that could obtain the relatively complete data from the official or Authorities. The collation and summary of relevant literature from the previous research results in this field to obtain the support of theories and research methods; then, discover inadequacies or blanks among those existing studies to find the direction of this thesis.

## **1.7 Chapter Outline**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the background of the topic, the significance of the research and the related literature

review, then points out the research question, main arguments, research objectives, theoretical framework and research methodology. The second chapter looks to the fact that China-Myanmar transnational marriage is an immigration phenomenon. From a demographic perspective, it analyzes the characteristics of transnational marriages between China and Myanmar in the context of transnational marriage immigration in the global and Asian regions. The third chapter contains the national policies on the legal framework of the transnational marriage between China and Myanmar. The fourth chapter describes the lived practices of “Burmese brides” towards transnational marriage. Chapter fifth analyzes the narrative which got from fieldwork in order to find out whether the differences in life of Burmese brides between Myanmar and China have led to their marriage immigration, and whether their expression of agency is limited in these immigration processes. The sixth chapter recapitulates the research questions and main points of this thesis, at the same time, makes a brief comparative study on the China-Myanmar transnational marriage and the marriage between China and other Southeast Asian neighbor countries. Finally, summarizes the results and shortcomings of the thesis.

### **1.8 Significance**

By examining women from Myanmar who marry Chinese men in Yunnan, I will create a fuller understanding about Burmese brides or China-Myanmar transnational marriages. By understanding it is a form of transnational marriage migration, the layer of inter-state relations and as types of lived practices and the layer of changing pattern of the brides' lives in both Myanmar and China. And correct some stereotypes or one-sided understandings about the Burmese brides that are prevalent in the public. It is clear that human trafficking and trade marriage are only two special kinds of lived practices in China-Myanmar transnational marriage. The marriages of free love are common phenomenon in the border areas. Therefore, this thesis hopes to re-understand the transnational marriages between China and Myanmar by providing different angles. Firstly, it will provide a new perspective to comprehend China-Myanmar



transnational marriages combined gendered migration; secondly, it will focus not only the interaction between marriage migration and the society of the receiving country, but also the interaction between marriage migration and sending country. Finally, I hope that through the analysis of media materials and the first-hand data collected from field work, it can give a more real and comprehensive image of "Burmese Brides" with less prejudice, misunderstanding and stigma.



## **Chapter 2 The “Burmese Brides” phenomenon in relation to Asian transnational marriage migration: a demographic perspective**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the structural reasons that produced the phenomenon of "Burmese Brides" – viewing the macro perspective. The increase in the number of Myanmar women marrying Chinese men, along with mass media reports from China, Myanmar and the West typically call these women "Burmese Brides" and linking them to victims of human trafficking, fake marriages, HIV-AIDS, etc. has created a negative impression in the public imaginations towards to these women, while also downplaying if not ignoring the 60% of these women who married out of their own choice.

In the border area between Myanmar and Yunnan, local people call these Burmese women married to Chinese "Burmese wives" rather than "Burmese brides" showing their acceptance into local Yunnan society. This chapter considers that these two terms express different understandings about those Burmese women between the media and local people, and negative media reports about "Burmese brides" may cause stigma. By analyzing the media images of "Burmese Brides" and the local view of "Burmese wives", this chapter elaborates why there is discrepancy of understanding between these women between mass media images and local understandings, and whether the term "Burmese Bride" has helped produce the stigma of Myanmar women married to men in Yunnan province.

The chapter begins by noting that transnational marriage is a kind of transnational migration. The turn of the new century has been called the “era of international migration”, one main feature of which was the “feminization” of migration (Castles and Miller 2014, 16-17). In the last two decades, transnational marriages in East and Southeast Asia has also been dominated by pattern of more women migrating from less developed countries to marry men in more developed

countries (Lu and Yang 2010, 15), showing one aspect of this feminization trend. Thus, this chapter links the growth in the number of the “Burmese brides” to this broad feminization of migration. Specifically, since China and Myanmar share a border, the China-Myanmar transnational marriage is a quite short-distance migration. This distinguishes it from other better studied transnational marriages in East and Southeast Asia. Since around 2000, China has become a key receiving country for women migrants from mainland Southeast Asia. Women from other mainland Southeast Asian countries, both Myanmar, and others, too are increasingly migrating to China’s border areas through marriage (Chen 2018, 120). This makes China-Myanmar transnational marriage as similar to marriages between China and Laos, China and Vietnam, and China and Cambodia. It is necessary to place China-Myanmar transnational marriages in such marriages context for discussion to help us better understand the formation of the recent increase in “Burmese brides”.

Push-pull theory stresses how pull factors from migrant receiving countries and push factors from migrant sending countries could produce migration behaviors. This chapter analyzes the demographic and sociopolitical issues and data from China and Myanmar, respectively, aiming to find out which factors produced the increase of “Burmese brides” in China-Myanmar transnational marriages and how these factors affect Myanmar women’s migration into southwestern Yunnan through marriage.

## **2.2 From “Burmese brides” to “Burmese wives”: stigmatization or not?**

### **2.2.1 The usage of “Burmese brides” or “Myanmar brides”.**

The term “Burmese” in “Burmese brides” is from the term “Burma”, “Burma” is the name of the main ethnic group in Myanmar and was used to name the country because it is the dominant ethnic group there. We will use it to refer to the country not the ethnic group. In 1989, the military government officially changed the English name of its own country from “Burma” to “Myanmar”. But there are some political and

human rights reasons to debate the terms of “Burma” and “Myanmar” for the country (DW Akademie News 2007). Therefore, both “Burma” and “Myanmar” will both be used in the thesis. With the change of the government in 1988, “Myanmar” has been accepted by more and more countries and international organizations. However, in earlier articles, books, news and media reports, “Burma” and “Burmese” are widely used. Hence, both of the terms will be used here, and their meanings are same as “Myanmar”, “Myanmar brides”.

### **2.2.2 The varying understandings of “Burmese brides” between the non-local and the local: from “Burmese brides” to Burmese wives**

This thesis seeks to identify “Burmese brides”. Most basically, it refers to Burmese women who marry Chinese men as brides, whether the Burmese women voluntarily or were forced to marry and whether they illegally or legally entered into China to marry. They may have just married in China, or have been married in China for several years, some of them have already had children. The term “Burmese brides” will not change easily even if Burmese women eventually acquire Chinese nationality, they will still be called “Burmese brides”.

It is worth noticing that, before the term “Burmese brides” became widespread in recent media reports, local people and local media of border areas usually call the Myanmar girls who married with local Chinese as “Burmese wives”. This latter term is a neutral word without praise or blame meaning and only used to indicate the nationality of the brides, contrary to the local wife or domestic wife.

Compared with the local term, “Burmese brides” is more often used in non-border areas and by people not familiar with the living situation of these women on the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier. The terms “Burmese wife” and “Burmese bride” represent the two different understandings of Burmese women married to Chinese men at both local and non-local levels. For the locals, their contact with Myanmar people has a long interactive history and the intermarriage with Burmese is commonplace. Their

acceptance of spouses from Myanmar is widespread. The term wives in "Burmese wives" not only indicates that they are the spouses of Chinese men, but also highlights their marital status and social status: "wives" refers to married women who have a stable marriage relationship with their husbands; the usage of "wives" means that the women are an important part of their own families, and they are accepted by their families or communities. The term "Burmese brides" meanwhile uses "brides" to indicate a woman who is going to marry or has just been married and it means that these women are new here and have not yet been fully accepted by her family or community, or have not yet integrated into the local area, which has the meaning of "exclusion from the locals".

The different usage between "Burmese wives" from the locals and "Burmese brides" from the non-locals is normal. With the increase of China-Myanmar transnational marriages, both the locals and non-locals have begun to pay attention to this phenomenon. But not all non-locals will really go to local places to learn more real situations of these women. Their ideas about married Burmese women in China comes more often from media reports by outsiders rather than from lived experiences people face round them. For example, local medias in southwestern Yunnan mostly use "Burmese Wives" to report transnational marriages between China and Myanmar, which are rich in content including diverse marriage customs, the living status of Burmese wives, the traffic problems of Myanmar women for marriages, etc. Mainstream Chinese or Western media more use "Burmese brides" in their reports that are often about Myanmar women being trafficked to China as brides and married, which means that the focus of these medias is more on human trafficking. Their concerns are limited and not as comprehensive as those of the locals. Sometimes, it is also impossible for national media or Western media to always go down to the local to understand the overall situation.

The locals have a smaller scope than non-locals, and their influence is limited. This is also why the Burmese Brides is better known to the public than Burmese

Wives. This difference in understanding between local and non-local people also shows that "Burmese Brides" is not a so suitable to describe the Myanmar women in transnational marriages between with men in Yunnan.

### **2.2.3 Multiple interpretations towards to "Burmese brides": stigmatization or not?**

In the context of transnational marriage, "Burmese bride" is not a new term. As early transnational marriages between Southeast Asia and East Asia, "mail-order bride", "Southeast Asian bride", "foreign bride", "Vietnamese bride" and "Philippine bride" have also been used. These terms are used to describe Southeast Asian women who enter the receiving country through marriage. Because most of the medium and academic researches about this topic usually focus on the commercialization, social exclusion, cultural adaptation and human trafficking, these terms are accompanied by many implicit discriminatory meanings and stereotypes from the receiving society.

At the same time, some scholars studying migration and transnational marriage also challenged and corrected stereotypes and stigmatization from the receiving society about these women who migrated through marriage, especially into Taiwan. For example, regarding "mail-order brides", which are often associated with poverty, opportunism and victims of human trafficking, the scholar Constable has made various evidences on these derogatory links. Among them, for instance, the refutation of "Hypergamy on marriage" that Asian brides marrying into more developed western countries men is for seeking economic and class improvement. She argues that some Asian brides who married to Western countries men, including Chinese, Filipino and Vietnamese women, as professional and well-educated women who were considered middle class in their country of origin; but in Western countries, their real living standards were indeed lower than in their country of origin (Constable 2005, 10-12). The opposition to the use of the terms "foreign brides" and "Southeast Asian brides" is very fierce in Taiwan. In 2003, the campaign against discriminatory vocabulary such

as "foreign brides" promoted by the Taiwanese scholar Hsiao-Chuan Hsia, which was called "Please call me —???, let new immigrant women say themselves (In Chinese as “请叫我—??? 让新移民女性说自己” 的征文活动). It is an essay recruitment activity to seek the new suitable terms to describe the foreign female immigrants, and they advocated the use of "new immigrant women" or "new immigrants". They think that "foreign brides" are mostly used to refer to Southeast Asian women who marry into Taiwan, which means that in the eyes of local people, these female immigrants are always like "brides" who just arrived at Taiwan, rather than the one who settled and integrated into the local society, which highlights the meaning of immigrant women as "outsiders" and ignores their subjectivity and independent personality (Wan, Zhu, and Tang 2013, 109). Even then, the political authorities said that avoiding the use of words such as "vulnerable groups" could avert foreign spouses and their children to be stigmatized or marginalized (Liu 2004).

At present, there is no unified conclusion about the definition of "Burmese brides". This thesis will use "Burmese Brides" to refer to Myanmar women who married to men in China. However, due to the different users and different usage environments, the implicit meanings attached to the vocabulary become quite different. Now, the "Burmese Bride" in the public impression is mainly shaped by media reports and academic research. One thing is certain that the word "Burmese Bride" seem to be giving Myanmar women married to Chinese men social prejudices, misunderstandings and stereotypes, just like such terms as "mail-order bride" and "Southeast Asian bride".

In media reports, the term "Burmese brides" is common. Whether it is Western media, Southeast Asian media, or mainstream Chinese media, they tend to report that "Burmese brides" usually appear as victims of human trafficking and commercial marriage, and they are just supplies of gender and geographical imbalance in China's population or they chose to marry Chinese men in order to get better living conditions

and so on. For examples, *Metro*, a British media, published an article entitled "The Burmese brides trafficked into China to marry total strangers" on its website *metro.co.uk*. It is mainly about a real event in which a Myanmar girl named Su Thandar was trafficked to China being a bride and suffered from domestic violence by her Chinese husband. Su is totally helpless and fragile in this article. After telling Su' story, the news briefly explores the causes of events such as Su and categorizes the results as a side effect of gender inequality in the population caused by China's one-child policy (Green 2013). Then, a Myanmar online newspaper, *irrawaddy.com*, there is an article titled "Websites Sell Burmese Brides to Chinese Bachelors". This article mainly uses several Burmese Bride Matching websites to understand how Myanmar women are displayed as "products" on the web, including bride prices, certain requirements for bride, etc. (Hui 2012). Furthermore, the official media of China, *people.com.cn*, has an article titled "Demystifying the Burmese bride who was trafficked into China: Who is paying more and selling it to whom?", which tells the story of the Chinese police breaking up a gang of abducting and selling Myanmar women, and revealing the whole process of Myanmar women being abducted and sold to China as "brides" (CCTV 2015).

In academic research, the slow start of transnational marriage research in China means there are two main groups of scholars. One group still uses popular terms like "Burmese bride(s)" and "Burmese wife(s)" for research; another group tend to oppose the use of terms "Burmese Bride" and "Burmese Wife". These scholars accused the behavior that uses "Burmese bride" and "Burmese Wife" to describe and study the Myanmar female immigrants in transnational marriage. They believe that this kind of behavior not only labels Myanmar marriage immigrants, but also lacks the spirit of professional academic research by drawing on articles and activities by Taiwanese scholars against the use of stigma and discriminatory term such as "foreign brides" (Chen 2018, 22). As mentioned in the literature review, in the context of China-Myanmar transnational marriage, scholars pay attention to a variety of topics and



research directions. Some scholars pay attention to the causes of those marriages, some focus on the characteristics of those marriages, some concern about effective between those marriages and population security in China, and some concentrate on the health problems of Burmese women in those marriages. If "Burmese bride" is used rashly, the invisible label would appear. For example, "Burmese bride" and population security, which will give people a kind of "Burmese bride" is the existence of population security problems.

In the term "Burmese bride", the word "Burmese" is used only to explain the identity of "foreigners" of the female, and the word "bride" only indicates that she has just married. It was an objective description in the past. However, the term is often used in selective reporting of mainstream media that are more related on social issues and is also used to study social issues in academic research, which inevitably comes with a derogatory or fixed stereotype toward to the term itself. At present, the use of the term "Burmese bride" seems to be experiencing the similar road to "mail-order bride" and "Southeast Asian bride".

Undeniably, as the transnational marriages proliferate, "Burmese brides" is reminiscent that some negative phenomenon, such as commercial marriage, women trafficking and so on. The term is often derogatory and stereotypical. Therefore, this thesis prefers the use of "Myanmar spouse", "Myanmar female spouse" or "Burmese woman". If "Burmese Bride" appears in this thesis, it is just for special explanation, and would be quoted.

## **2.3 The growth and feminization of transnational marriage in Asia**

### **2.3.1 Transnational marriages in East and Southeast Asia**

As mentioned in the first chapter, the trend of international immigration shows a dual trend of growth and feminization. As a form of international immigration, transnational marriage is also growing, and gradually develops into a female-

dominated migrant. Within Asia, transnational marriages began to emerge in the 1980s and gradually became an important transnational phenomenon. Often, such marriages satisfy the gender imbalance, which means that the vast majority of women from underdeveloped countries marry men from more developed countries (Lu and Yang 2010, 15). Especially in wealthy East Asian countries and less developed Southeast Asian countries. For example, traditionally, men from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong get married with women from mainland of China, Vietnam, Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Laos.

In Japan, according to the statistics from Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Vital Statistics of Japan, from 1975 to 2015, the number and proportion of marriages between foreign wives and Japanese husbands exceeded the number and proportion of marriages of foreign wives and Japanese husbands (MHLW 2016). Thus, from 1980's, Japan's transnational marriage was gradually dominated by foreign wife, showing an obvious feminization characteristic. In addition, the statistics also showed that since 1965, the number of transnational marriages was increasing until 2006, then, shown a downward trend, especially the number of marriages of foreign wives and Japanese husbands, and it has dropped significantly (MHLW 2016). This is not an accidental decline, which is due to the intervention of the Japanese government. before the 1990s, foreign wives mainly came from South Korea, China and the United States. This result is reasonable, if we look back at the history of those countries at that time. Since 1992, the countries of origin of foreign wives have begun to diversify, mainly in South Korea, China, the Philippines and Thailand. Among them, the growth of the Filipino wife and Chinese wife was very large (Chung, Kim, and Piper 2016, 465). In 2005, the Japanese government claimed that the Immigration Control Act had been revised for public safety, and some visas, such as entertainment visas, had been issued strictly (Nippon.com 2015). Entertainment visas were the main visas for Filipino women to work and live in Japan at that time. Moreover, the Japanese government has also strengthened the control of fake marriages in order to prevent foreign women

from acquiring Japanese citizenship through marriage. This policy has led to a sharp reduction in the number of Chinese wives (Nippon.com 2018).

In South Korea, after 1994, the number of marriages between South Korean husbands and foreign wives has remained higher than that between South Korean wives and foreign husbands. This is similar to transnational marriages in Japan, which showed feminization characteristics. Otherwise, the total number of transnational marriages had a growth process, reaching their maximum values in 2005, and then began to decline (KOSIS 2018). The main original countries of South Korean foreign wives are China, Vietnam, Philippines, Japan, Cambodia, Thailand, USA and Mongolia. Before 1995, China, Japan and USA were the main sending countries. Since 1996, the types of original countries of foreign wives became more, mainly including China, Vietnam, Philippines, Japan and Cambodia. China is ahead, followed by Vietnam and the Philippines. More remarkable, Chinese wives are mainly Josunjoks who are Chinese ethnic Korean (Lee 2008, 112). In 1990, local governments in South Korea actively promoted marriage meetings between their local farmers and Josunjok women of China. After that, the South Korean government adopted the open door policy on those transnational brides, which rose the number of marriages between Josunjok women and South Korean men. But, unfortunately, this policy produced many social problems of “fake marriage”; in 1996, the South Korean government had to sign a memorandum with the Chinese government to tighten the policy of transnational marriage (Lee 2008, 112). Therefore, after 1996, the number of marriages between foreign wives and South Korean husbands will decrease. In 2003, the transnational marriage policy was simplified. Approximately, at the same time, the booming development of international marriage intermediaries increased the number of marriages between foreign wives and South Korean husbands. Until 2005, the South Korean government began to pay attention to transnational marriage immigration, and at the same time began to regulate international marriage agencies, which made the number of marriages between foreign wives and South Korean husbands began to decline again (Bélanger, Lee, and Wang 2010, 1114).

According to the statistics from Department of Household Registration, M.O.I. Republic of China (Taiwan), Overall trend, Taiwan's transnational marriage has increased rapidly since 1998, reaching a peak of 54,634 in 2003, accounting for 31.86% of all marriages. From 2003 to 2008, the number of transnational marriages continued to fall. Among the trend, the number of marriages between Taiwan husbands and foreign wives has remained higher than that between Taiwan wives and foreign husbands since 1998, which shows that Taiwan's transnational marriages are always dominated by the mode of marriage between foreign women and Taiwan men.

Before 1996, Taiwan's foreign wives mainly consisted of South Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Taiwan's diversity of Southeast Asian wives appeared earlier than that of Japan and South Korea, mainly due to Taiwan's increased investment in Southeast Asia at that time (Chung, Kim, and Piper 2016, 468). In 1996, the number of mainland of China wives exceeded the number of wives in other countries with absolute growth, but at the same time, the number of wives in Southeast Asia also increased rapidly. Then, after the 2001-2005 period, the numbers of mainland (China) wives and Southeast Asia wives declined together. The main reason is that, like Japan and South Korea, the government has implemented a new control policy on transnational marriage and tightened the implementation of transnational marriage. The aim is to deal with the problems brought by the rapid increase of transnational marriage, such as fake marriage (Chung, Kim, and Piper 2016, 468).

Following the statistic of Department of Statistics, Singapore, from 2002 to 2017, Singapore's transnational marriage had a tendency to fluctuate and increase slowly, from 6806 in 2002 to 9263 in 2012, and the next year to 8566 between 2014 and 2017, the number of Singapore's transnational marriage has slightly fluctuated, but remained at around 8,500. The marriage trend of Non-citizen brides and Singapore citizen is basically the same as that of total transnational marriage. It has increased from 5082 in 2002 to a peak of 7027 in 2012, and then slightly decreased. From 2013 to 2017, there was slight fluctuation, but it remained at around 6300. Then, from the

perspective of marriage type, the number of marriages of Non-citizen brides and Singapore citizens has remained above the number of marriages in Non-citizen grooms and Singapore citizens, and the gap is large. This shows that during the period 2002-2017, Singapore's transnational marriages also had a feminization trend (Strategy Group 2018).

In addition, among the marriages of Non-citizen brides and Singapore citizens, Non-citizen brides mainly come from Asia, Americas, Europe, Oceania. But the number of brides from Asia was far more than that of other countries. Because the number of brides from Asia has been above 4,500 since 2002, while other countries have stayed in two digits (Strategy Group 2018).

Transnational marriage in Hong Kong mainly focuses on cross-boundary marriages, as called by Census and Statistics Department, between Hong Kong and the mainland. Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics 2018 showed the changes in the Mainland-Hong Kong cross-boundary marriages from 1991 to 2016. Above all, from the type of marriage, it is very obvious that the number of marriages between HK residents and Mainland brides was consistently higher than the number of marriages of HK residents and Mainland grooms between 1991 and 2016, which means that the number of mainland brides dominate the Mainland-Hong Kong cross-boundary marriages. In 1991, the number of marriages of Mainland brides and HK residents was 21 220, accounting for 93.9% of all cross-boundary marriages in same year, while the number of the marriages of HK brides and Mainland men had only 1,390, accounting for the remaining 6.1%.

Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been an upward trend in cross-boundary marriages of HK brides and Mainland men. In 2016, 7626 cases were married by HK brides and Mainland men, occupying 33.3% in all cross-boundary marriages, while the number of marriages between HK residence and Mainland brides is 15 300, and

occupying 66.7% of all cross-boundary marriages (Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics 2018, 10).

At present, within Asia, the concerns and data on transnational marriages between Southeast Asian women and East Asian men are more extensive and comprehensive than those in South Asia and North Asia. But, South Asia and North Asia also vaguely show the trend of feminization of transnational marriage. According to the Group Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2015, India and Nepal maintain free borders between the two countries, and transnational marriages between those two countries' people are widespread. Following by the statistics of the Nepal census in 2001, 66% of foreign women belonged to marriage immigrants, but no foreign males aimed at marriage immigration (UNESCAP 2015, 42).

To summary up: transnational marriages in Asia had increased dramatically, but this trend was vulnerable to be policy-oriented by Nations. It began to rise since the 1970s, and then there has been a phenomenon of periodic growth. Such as, Japan, Korea and Taiwan grew rapidly before 2005. Around 2005, the number of these marriages decreased rapidly as their government adjusted the policy towards to transnational marriages, which shows that national policies have a major impact on the implementation of transnational marriages. The trend of transnational marriages in Singapore has maintained a slight increase in volatility, but in recent years, the number has been relatively stable. Transnational marriage in Hong Kong is also a kind of volatility and the quantity does not change much.

From the perspective of gender, the number of marriages between foreign wives and local husbands in these five countries and regions is much higher than that between foreign husbands and local wives, showing the characteristics of feminization.

From the perspective of original countries distribution of foreign wives, the five countries and regions are basically similar that since the rise of transnational

marriages, foreign wives are mainly from less developed Asian countries involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia and other Asian countries.

### **2.3.2 Transnational marriages in China and mainland Southeast Asia**

#### ***i. Overview of Transnational marriages in China and mainland Southeast Asia***

For most transnational marriages between East and Southeast Asian countries, they belong to long-distance migration. For the transnational marriages between China and the mainland of Southeast Asia, they belong to the geographical proximity migration. In addition, in the countries of East Asia and Southeast Asia, China usually is the traditional "brides" sending country, but for the mainland of Southeast Asia, China plays the role of receiving country.

Transnational marriages between China and mainland Southeast Asia occur mainly in men from Yunnan and Guangxi Province and women from Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Except Cambodia, other three countries are all connected with China border and have a long-term intermarriage phenomenon. The transnational marriage between China and Cambodia has only been noticed in recent years with media coverage. In China, the appearance of large-scale "Southeast Asia bride" phenomenon began after reform and opening up policy, especially after 2009. But many of them belong to the "three groups (illegal entry, illegal residence, illegal work)" who are strictly controlled by the China government (Liu 2013, 19). Over the past 20 years, these transnational marriages have been increasing, with "Vietnamese brides" and "Burmese brides" being the most prominent.

According to the provincial statistics, the survey report of Yunnan Provincial Civil Affairs Department on transnational marriage of ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province in 2013 showed: by May 2012, there were 25240 women married in Yunnan Province from neighboring countries, including 20362 women from Myanmar, accounting for 80.67%; 3972 women from Vietnam, accounting for 15.74%; 905

women from Laos, accounting for 3.59%; and one from other countries. Meanwhile, only around 80 men from neighboring countries got married with Yunnan women (Chen 2018, 120). Until the beginning of 2015, the total number of transnational marriages in Yunnan Province is 45908. Among those marriages, the neighboring country migrants mainly come from Myanmar, around 77.39%, Vietnam, around 18.98%, Laos, around 3.33% and others around 0.30% (Chen 2018, 117). There were 42630 women married in Yunnan Province from neighboring countries, accounting for 92.86% and 3278 men married in Yunnan Province from neighboring countries, accounting for 7.14% (Chen 2018, 120). (PS: these marriages include legal and illegal marriages in China)

In Guangxi Province, where only are adjacent to Vietnam, the main female marriage immigrants come from Vietnam. At present, there is no complete academic or official statistics on the number of "Vietnamese brides" in China (especially in Guangxi), but a growing trend can still be seen. According to the incomplete statistics of a survey conducted in early 1986, the number of Vietnamese women entering Guangxi for marriages from 1979 to 1985 was 122. but by the mid-1990s, the statistics of public security departments, more than 12,000 Vietnamese women spouses were found to stay illegally in Guangxi (Liu 2011, 64). In 2010, 47000 "Vietnamese brides" hold the legal marital status with their Chinese husband in China. In 2011, and more than 65000 undocumented "Vietnamese brides" were counted by Guangxi public security departments (Ji 2016, 106).

Additionally, about the issue of "Cambodian brides" in China, most reports and news media focus on human trafficking. A research report in 2016 called "*Human Trafficking Vulnerabilities: A Study on Forced Marriage between Cambodia and China*" from UN-ACT show that although there are many rumors that some or most Cambodian women are satisfied with their arranged marriages in China, more and more cases of forced marriage between the two countries have been identified (UN-



ACT 2016). In 2013, the Cambodian government reported that it had assisted China in repatriating 21 Cambodian women who were involved in forced marriages. And the number increased to 58 in 2014, later to 85 in 2015 (UN-ACT 2016, 2).

In general, the status of transnational marriage between China and the mainland in Southeast Asia has shown a growing trend in the past 20 years, and it is dominated by the marriage patterns of mainland Southeast Asian women and Chinese men. At the same time, a certain number of these marriages are often in an illegal state in China, and are known to the public as some social issues.

## ***ii. The growth and feminization of China-Myanmar transnational marriages***

### ***a. Growth trend***

At present, Myanmar side doesn't have comprehensive statistics on China-Myanmar transnational marriage. There are missing or inaccurate data in China side about China-Myanmar transnational marriage, including national statistics, statistics from Yunnan Province or statistics from local border states, since the transnational marriages are not part of the government's regular statistical programs. Moreover, sometimes due to the inconsistency of the statistical caliber of the local governments and provincial governments and national governments, data conflicts may occur. Therefore, demographic statistics proving the continuous growth of transnational marriage in China and Myanmar can't be directly obtained as in other Asian countries. It is necessary to collate and summarize the statistics of various relevant government departments. In addition, some data can also be obtained from relevant research papers. Because in such academic projects with sufficient funds and human resources, they are often able to complete statistics on the number of transnational marriages in one or more China-Myanmar border villages or counties over a specific period of time. Sometimes, those data are even more accurate and comprehensive than the government data.

In the first chapter, I briefly illustrated the growth of China-Myanmar transnational marriage in Dehong State. In fact, the same is showed in other border areas.

Taking Baoshan City as an example. Baoshan City of Yunnan Province is located in the southwestern border of China, including Tengchong County, Ningchang County, Longling County, Shidian County and Longyang District. Among them, Tengchong and Longling directly bordering Myanmar, including the border townships of Minguang, Diantan, Houqiao (a state-level mouth) and Mucheng. Until August Oct, 2010, the city has a total of nearly 5,000 transnational marriage families. 2,221 in Longling County, 1,589 in Tengchong County, 446 in Shidian County, 351 in Longyang District and 18 in Changning County. Under investigation of Chinese scholar, they found that the number of transnational marriages in Baoshan increased from 1990s, such as Xueshan village of Longling County, there was no any China-Myanmar transnational marriages in the 19th century. It rose in 2002 and began to continuously and rapidly grew since 2007. In 2008, there were 1922 China-Myanmar transnational marriages and in 2010, there were 2221, which means within two years, the number of China-Myanmar transnational marriages has increased 15.5% (Yang 2011, 47). At the end of 2012, the number of transnational marriage reached 7483, of which 99.996% were happened between China and Myanmar people; by the end of 2013, the number reached 8083, the vast majority of which were China-Myanmar transnational marriage (Chen 2018, 118).

Lancang County belongs to Puer City (Simao City) located in the southwest of Yunnan Province, bordering Myanmar. There are 20 townships in the county. Shujuan Zhao, a Chinese scholar, has conducted a long-term survey on transnational marriages between China and Myanmar in Lancang County. The results showed that China-Myanmar transnational marriages were on the rise year by year. In 2004, there were

11 couples of transnational marriages, 13 in 2005, 19 in 2006, 28 in 2007, 38 in 2008, 40 in 2009 (Zhao 2011, 90-91).

Lincang City is another municipal administrative region only connected with Myanmar, which belongs to Yunnan Province. According to the early survey of Lincang People's Congress, the following data are obtained: In 2006, 108 couples of local citizens and Myanmar border people were registered for marriage; 126 couples were registered in 2007; 227 couples were registered in 2008 and 278 couples were registered in 2009. Among them, the statistics of marriage registration data of Zhenkang County Civil Affairs Bureau in Lincang County show that: in the first half of 2010, there were 106 transnational marriages between China and Myanmar, which increased twice as much as the same period last year (Zhao 2011, 90-91).

According to the survey report of Yunnan Provincial Civil Affairs Department on transnational marriages of ethnic minorities in Yunnan in 2013, the number of transnational marriages between China and Myanmar in border towns of Baoshan City has increased by more than 10% annually in the past 10 years, and in the some of the towns, such as Bingma (丙麻乡) and Wadu (瓦渡乡) villages, the annual growth rate has exceeded 30%. About 51% of China-Myanmar transnational marriages in Dehong state were concluded in five years, and 80.9% of transnational marriages were concluded in nearly 10 years. By the end of 2009, the number of transnational marriages between China and Myanmar people were 3888; until the end of 2011, the number had increased to 4696. Within two years, the growth rate reached 20.8% (Chen 2018, 118).

By sorting out and comparing the China-Myanmar transnational marriage data in Dahong State, Baoshang City, Puer City and Lincang City, it can objectively show the obvious growth situation of transnational marriage between China and Myanmar, which is similar with the trend of transnational marriage in Asia.

#### ***b. Feminization trend***

According to the local statistics, the transnational marriage registration statistics of China-Myanmar border people by the Dehong State Public Security Bureau revealed that as of July 2012, the number of transnational marriages of China-Myanmar border people registered in the government departments in Mangshi City was 2930, of which the number of marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men was 2742, while the number of marriages between Myanmar men and Chinese women was 188; The number of transnational marriages registered in Ruili City is 2273. Among them, the number of marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men was 1865, while the number of marriages between Myanmar men and Chinese women were 408. The number of transnational marriages registered in Lianghe county was 417. Among them, the number of marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men was 396, the number of marriages between Myanmar men and Chinese women was 21. The number of transnational marriages registered in Yingjiang county was 2318. Among them, the number of marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men was 1926, the number of marriages between Myanmar men and Chinese women was 212. The number of transnational marriages registered in Longchuan county was 1654. Among them, the number of marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men was 1532, the number of marriages between Myanmar men and Chinese women was 122 (Zhang and Bao 2013, 86).

Then taking Lancang County and Ximeng County of Puer City in Yunnan Province as examples: In Lancang County, from 2004 to 2009, the transnational marriages of China-Myanmar border people totaled in 149, of which the number of marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men was 140, accounting for about 93.9%, while the number of marriages between Myanmar men and Chinese women was only 9, accounting for about 6.1% (Zhao 2011, 90-91). In Ximeng County, a survey related to transnational marriage of China-Myanmar border people in 2010 displayed that there were 793 couples of marriages among local residents and Myanmar people at the end of August 2010, including 725 marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men and 68 marriages between Myanmar men and Chinese women (Zhao

2011, 92). Proportion of Myanmar women married into China is much higher than that of Myanmar men married into China.

After following the local statistical data on gender, we can see that transnational marriages between China and Myanmar are gradually dominated by female migration, showing a feminization trend.

#### **2.4 Demographic and sociopolitical reasons for shaping the transnational marriages on Yunnan-Myanmar border**

“Push-Pull” theories are often used in the study of immigration, which focus on reasons from sending country and receiving country. So it is a clear way to analyze the reasons for the phenomenon of immigration. Within transnational marriages on Yunnan-Myanmar, the surge in “Burmese Brides” in China has been confirmed. So, what contributed to this phenomenon of marriage immigration? Based on existing research, towards to the transnational marriages of China-mainland of Southeast Asian countries, China’s one-child policy and Chinese traditional preference for sons is widely accepted as a cause for Chinese men finding spouses from neighboring countries (UN-ACT 2016, 1). This applies equally to China-Myanmar transnational marriages. However, it is not enough to focus solely on the Chinese side. Therefore, this section will be based on both China and Myanmar to discover the reasons for the increase in “Burmese bride” from a structural perspective.

Historically, in the border areas of China and Myanmar, there are many transnational ethnic groups. The ethnic marriage is not only the natural choice of men and women from the same transnational ethnic group in the early days, but also the active choice of men and women from different ethnic groups in recent years. It will be considered a push factor to cause Myanmar women to marry Chinese men. In the China-Myanmar transnational marriage, as China's economy is slightly better than the Myanmar economy in recent years, the economic disparity between the two countries will be considered as an important push factor in Myanmar and pull factor in China. In

addition, in China, Gender imbalance and marriage squeeze are also vital pull factors; in Myanmar, the civil war and persecution of AIDS and drugs in northern Myanmar are significant push factors.

#### **2.4.1 Ethnic marriage**

##### ***i. Traditional marriage pattern in Yunnan-Myanmar border: from same ethnic marriages to transnational marriages***

The China-Myanmar border is 2,186 kilometers long, of which 1997 kilometers is shared with Yunnan province. Traditionally, these frontier areas were not separated by a clear border, because local minority leaders ruled ethnic areas independently of states based in what is now called China and Myanmar, and most marriages took place within or between ethnic groups, so that ethnic boundaries mattered more than state boundaries. Before modern nation-states, there were no transnational marriages (Dong, 2013, 38-39). After China and Myanmar signed the initial "Border Treaty" in 1960, many ethnic groups in this area were divided into two countries - Myanmar and China - and are now part of transnational ethnic groups. At present, at least 16 different transnational ethnic groups live in the China-Myanmar border area. They have been classified by Chinese scholars based on various features like geographical distribution, cultural characteristics, linguistic features, religious beliefs, as shown in Figure 2. (Zhou 2007) (Yao 2011).

Each of the 16 transnational ethnic groups may be part of larger ethnic groups, such as the Myanmar Shan ethnic group or the Chinese Dai minority. The Myanmar Kachin ethnic group and Chinese Jingpo minority historically are the same ethnic group, sharing the same language, customs and exchanges. These ethnic groups also kept own traditional intra-ethnic marriage. Before the founding of the PRC in 1949 and even for some time afterwards, the Jingpo and Dai people still practiced hierarchical intra-ethnic marriages, and even intra-village marriage was common; Lisu people preferred sub-consanguineous intra-clan marriage, with women seldom

marrying outside the clan, and were kept in the family as its property and labor force (Wang 2014, 54). When marriages in the same ethnic group were separated by newly defined national boundaries, they become “transnational marriages”.

*Figure 2 Transnational Ethnic Groups on the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier*

Name of ethnic group in China	Name of ethnic group in Myanmar
	Major group — branch group
1.Han	Shan—Kokant/Kokang
2.Jingpo	Kachin—Gyeinphaw
3.Dai/Tai	Shan—Shan
4.Lisu	Kachin—Lisu
5.Miao	Shan—Hmong (undefined)
6.Lahu	Shan—Lahu
7.Wa	Shan—Wa
8.De’ang	Shan—Palaung/Ta-ang
9.Hani	Shan—Kaw/Akha
10.Bulang	Shan—Part of Wa
11.Yao	undefined
12.Achang	Shan—Maingtha
13.Nu	Kachin—Nung (undefined)
14.Dulong	Kachin—Rawang
15.Hui	Panthay/Pase/Pathe (unaccepted)
16.Kemu (undefined)	Shan—Khamu

*Ps: These 16 cross-border ethnic groups are based on the findings of Chinese scholars Jianxin Zhao, Yong Yao and Peng Yao. They make a comparative study of the ethnic groups in China and Myanmar in terms of dress, living habits, traditional customs, language, history and so on to determine whether they are likely to be the same ethnic group or not.*

*\* “undefined” means the ethnic group(s) exists with or without an informal name, but not officially defined yet by the governments.*

*\* “unaccepted” means the ethnic group(s) is not accepted by governments.*

## ***ii. From transnational marriages within same ethnic groups to different ethnic groups***

On the Myanmar-China border, intra-ethnic marriage is historically quite common and still desirable today. But many recent changes have reshaped how and why transnational marriages take place there. Chinese scholars have found such marriages have begun to expand outward beyond the same ethnic group to new groups beyond intra-ethnic marriage so marrying into different ethnic groups is more common, and again from marrying in border areas to marrying further inland in China. Wenying Yang has studied transnational marriage in Baoshan city in 2011 finding that historically, transnational marriage mainly happened in Lisu minority and

there were very few cross-ethnic marriages before the 1990s, but since 2000, the proportion of cross-ethnic marriage have become much higher than marriage in the same ethnic group (2011, 48). Xiaoyan Wang's study indicates that rural reforms and changes in the marriage market of China have expanded the migration and communication of border people, as well as the pool of those involved in initial transnational marriages less restricted by regional and ethnic groups (2014, 56).

In recent decades, transnational marriages have gradually become unidirectional rather than bidirectional, with most movement now consisting of Myanmar women moving to marry Chinese men in Yunnan. Earlier transnational marriages were more bidirectional with the men and women of Myanmar freely marrying with Chinese, and with men and women of China freely marrying Myanmar people. Since around 1980, it is more common for Myanmar women to marry Chinese men in China (Yue 2014, 24).

#### 2.4.2 Economic disparity between China (Yunnan) and Myanmar

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, China has made great progress. However, due to the unstable domestic political situation and ethnic conflicts, the economic development speed of Myanmar has greatly been curbed, and compared with China, especially Yunnan province, there is a certain gap in the economic. As shown in figure 3:

*Figure 3 Comparison of Economic Situation of China (Yunnan) and Myanmar*

Series Name	Country/ province	2000	2005	2010	2015	2017
GDP (US\$)	China	1211346869605.24	2285965892360.54	6100620488867.55	11064666282625.5	12237700479375
GDP (US\$)	Yunnan (China)	29981067946.69	51619361378.61	107691780209.30	203022718463.97	266556155153.39
GDP (US\$)	Myanmar	8905066163.59	11986972418.51	49540813342.48	59687410896.57	67068745521.38

*Data of China and Myanmar from database: World Development Indicators; Updated: 03/21/2019; <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&series=NY.GDP.MKTP.CD&country=MMR#>*

*Data of Yunnan from National bureau of statistics of China.*

*<http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=E0103&zb=A0201&reg=530000&sj=2018>*

*Ps: The Unit of Yunnan GDP is Chinese Yuan, here it is converted into US dollars according to the international exchange rate 1USD=6.7082CNY updated at 2019-04-05 13:48:21.*



Transnational marriage is an immigrant phenomenon, according to “Transition theories” of western scholars Stephen Castles, it believes that the cross-border marriage immigrant population is regarded as an intrinsic part of a country’s economic development and believes that a country’s economic and social development quickly would guide a greater mobility of the population, and this is an inevitable causality (Chen and Yang 2016, 112). China's relatively better economy and stable social development environment will lead to a kind of immigration flow.

In their survey, scholars Ying Mei and Hongjun Li found that the Myanmar homes of Burmese women who had been married in China were poorer. Most of them live in remote areas with poor transportation and economic backwardness. There is no electricity, water or road connect with outside. Because of the relative superiority of China's living conditions and infrastructure, it has made a definite attraction for Myanmar women. In their eyes, China is a country with a prosperous economy, stable living environment and a much higher economic level than Myanmar. In order to improve their living standards and live a comfortable life, most of them would like to be married into China. From this perspective, these Myanmar women regard marriage as a way to change their economic and social status (Mei and Li 2015, 30).

But at the same time, because of a better China's economic environment, Myanmar women want to earn more money and want to work and study in China, but this desire is often used by human traffickers. In the most of the cases revealed by the media, the reasons why women were trafficked from Myanmar to China mostly are that they believed human traffickers would provide work for them. A media named South China Morning Post showed a case:

A Myanmar girl called May Khine Oo was trafficked in a train to return to her parents in Mudon Township. She met a couple, they wanted to provide a work to her, and she refused. But she drank the potable water that the couple provided, and then all she knew was that she was asleep, and missed her destination station and had no

money to go home. The couple said they could help her find a job to earn a ticket home. Then couple first took her to a restaurant for working three months and late sold her to China, where she was forced to marry twice (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2107).

The Kachin Women's Association of Thailand and the Palaung Women's Association (a group located in northwest Shan state) report that in hundreds of cases Burmese women accept job offers in China, but then find themselves were sold to Chinese men (Hackney 2015, 9).

### **2.4.3 Gender imbalance and marriage squeeze in China**

In China, due to the large population base, the implication of one-child policy until 2016 and female inter-provincial migration, there still are problems such as the large gap between rich and poor, the imbalance between male and female and male marriage squeeze.

The one-child policy, which began in 1979, stipulates that each family can have only one child, especially in urban areas. Women should follow the quota for bearing baby. Families would be fined a certain amount if they have number of baby over the "quota" (Li and Zhang 2006, 1). However, the actual one-child policy is much more complicated. In different years, different provinces have different ways to implement the one-child policy. There will also be special provisions for special groups of people. For examples, for families with rural household registration, no matter which ethnic group they belong to, they are allowed to have two children; then, the one-child policy applies to the vast majority of Han women, and Chinese minority women are allowed to have two children. The one-child policy was originally designed to control the rapid growth of China's population. But when it meets to the traditional son preference in Chinese culture, it leads to an increase in the rate of abortion, infanticide and

abandonment of female fetuses (Su 2013, 10), which eventually leads to a gender imbalance in the population.

In terms of the gender structure, the data of China's sixth census in 2010 show that the sex ratio of unmarried men and women over the age of 15 is 1.3345, In Yunnan province, the sex ratio of unmarried men and women over the age of 15 is 1.625 which is well above the average of country; The unmarried proportion of unmarried men in China is 13.11%, women 11.22%, unmarried men and women have a sex ratio of 1.108 (Weng 2015, 46). And in 2017, the data released by the National Bureau of Statistics show that the male population is 711.37 million, the female population is 67.871 million, and the male population is 32.66 million more than the female population. This part of the extra male population is concentrated in China's rural areas, mountainous areas and impoverished areas. Due to poverty constraints, most rural or border men turned their attention to neighboring countries.

Narrowing the scope to Yunnan Province, as well as the field survey destinations of this thesis, Donghong prefecture and Baoshan City, the gender imbalance still exists. Shown as figure 4:

*Figure 4 Historical Population at Year-end in Significant Years (10,000 persons)*

Year	2000		2010		2017	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Yunnan	2192.0	2048.8	2387.6	2214.0	2490.9	2309.6
Dehong	51.4	50.4	62.5	58.7	67.5	63.4
Baoshan	120.0	114.5	128.7	122.3	134.0	127.4

*Source from Yunnan Statistical Yearbook 2001, 2011, 2018*

Figure 4 tells us that in the past, Yunnan Province has also been in a state of male population over female population for a long time. Although the Chinese government opened its second child policy on January 1, 2016, the serious social

problem left over by the one-child policy for more than 30 years that a large number of bachelors are not easy to find a spouse will still be long. And it may be just like the estimate from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences that there will be 24 million single men looking for a wife by 2020 (Fang 2017).

From the perspective of China's urban-rural gap and population mobility: according to China's family development report 2015 from National Health and Family Planning Commission of PRC show that unmarried men in China are mainly in rural areas and are distributed in all age groups. Unmarried women are more concentrated in urban areas. The report points out that in China, there is a "marriage squeeze" phenomenon that when there is a shortage of marriageable women of the same age, the men will choose wives from younger women. To a certain extent, it will develop to other regions, such as urban men seeking rural women. This has undoubtedly reduced the number of women and increased gender imbalance in rural, mountainous and poor areas (News.eastday.com 2015).

The one-child policy also affects the way that women choose their spouses. Because of the high demand of single women in China, they can choose carefully and usually choose men with better resources than themselves (Fang 2017). This also causes male marriage squeeze that less wealthy men have more difficulty finding the right spouse. From the view of the cost of marriage, in China, there always is the custom of betrothal gifts that the bridegroom should give the bride a suitable money. According to the estimates, in 2015, the price of betrothal gifts of Chinese women was between 12,300-41,000 yuan (\$1,500 to \$5,000), although that figure could vary depending on location or income level. But in fact, in addition to the price of betrothal gifts, if a Chinese man wants to get married, he needs a house to show himself having the ability to support a family (Hackney 2015, 4). This is a major economic burden for poor Chinese, and with the development of Chinese economy, Chinese women have more and more high requirement to of betrothal gifts, the average price of today is far

higher than in 2015. As a result, the cost of marrying a Burmese woman is lower than the cost of marrying a Chinese woman.

#### **2.4.4 The civil war and persecution of AIDS and Drugs in northern Myanmar**

##### *i. The civil wars in northern Myanmar*

After the independence of Myanmar, the conflicts between the Myanmar government and the ethnic armed forces continued, causing a large number of border residents to pour into the neighboring countries for evade the war. China is linked to northern Myanmar that was the areas occupied by most ethnic minority armed forces. On August 8, 2009, the "808" event occurred, Myanmar's military government and Kokang government led by President Jiasheng Peng formed confrontation, then triggered a military conflict. And this conflict led more than 30000 border Burmese overnight into Chinese side of the border region (Zhao and Yang 2016, 75). Chinese scholars Xinghua Hou in his Interview survey about Myanmar women who got married in a border town of Baoshan city show that although Myanmar women have a good family in Myanmar, due to the Kokang conflict, their parents still sent them getting married into China. Because their parents worried that they would spoil by soldiers or social bullies (Hou 2012, 60).

During the time of 2011 to February 2012, the conflict between Myanmar's government and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) reignited a huge influx of refugees into China for seeking asylum. Chinese scholars Jing Zhao made an interview with Huyu village villagers and government personnel in Dehong State and confirmed that a portion of the Myanmar people could get rid of the pain of the war by married with locals. In order to seek a stable living environment and marry into Chinese territory for Myanmar border people, especially women, are the better choice (Zhao and Yang 2016, 73).

In 2018, according to the BBC news, on April 28, Kachin Independence Organization and the Burmese army have been in a state of tension. Recently, government military opened fire first to KIA and launched air strikes. According to the United Nations, 4000 people have been displaced since April. The conflict broke out near the borders between China and Myanmar, where thousands of people have fled to china border (BBC NEWS 2018).

Thus, the ongoing conflict between ethnic armed forces and government military in northern Myanmar is a driving force for Myanmar women to marry in China.

Furthermore, ethnic conflicts in Myanmar often make the trafficking of women more rampant. In a 2013 report, KWAT highlighted the potential threat of women trafficking from the conflict between the KIO and the Burmese army. The report says that before the outbreak of the conflict between the KIO and the Burmese army in 2011 to 2012 years, the phenomenon of human trafficking was exacerbated by the fact that the Myanmar government didn't give Kachin's migrant workers a legitimate identity. After the outbreak of the conflict, it was exacerbated because Kachin people had a new role —refugees. They are moving to the Chinese border, in order to survive, they would work in China. But due to the lack of relevant documents, they belong to the illegal entry China, whereas human traffickers often use this weakness to implement the trafficking (KWAT 2013).

## ***ii. Persecution of AIDS and Drugs in northern Myanmar***

Myanmar is the second largest producer of illicit opium in the world after Afghanistan. Poppy cultivation is concentrated in northern Myanmar, mainly including mountainous areas in Shan and Kachin states. At the same time, although there are no specific statistics, these areas are considered to be the hardest hit areas of HIV, hepatitis B and C transmission and lethal overdoses in drugs (GPAG 2017, 2). According to UNAIDS data in 2018, 220000 peoples suffered from HIV in 2017, of which 11000 were new infections, which accounted for a high proportion of new

infections globally (Avert.org 2019). HIV prevalence among people mainly came from 4 groups people who inject drugs, around accounting for 27.9%; men who had sex with men, around accounting for 6.4%; prisoners, with 5.6%; female sex workers, approximately accounting for 5.4% (Avert.org 2019). We can know that drug addicts are the main route of HIV infection in Myanmar. Currently, in Myanmar, about one in every three drug users carries HIV; in some areas of Kachin State, about one in every two drug users carries HIV (DPAG 2017, 3), which is a very high probability. As of 2016, there is still no official data on the number of drug users in Myanmar, but about 83,000 men are estimated to be injecting drugs (UNDOC 2016). Early data showed that in 1994, the ratio of female HIV carriers to male HIV carriers was 1:8; in 2008, the ratio became 1.7:2.1 (UNAIDS 2014, 29). This shows that the number of men who carry HIV than the number of women. To some extent, this is why Myanmar women choose Chinese husbands to marry. In the field work of this thesis, an interviewed Myanmar wife *TU5* once said that the reason why she wanted to marry Chinese men was that there were so many drug-taking Burmese men in her hometown, and they were too likely to carry HIV. Her home town is Namhkan which is in Shan state, northern Myanmar. It can be seen that ‘marrying out’ is also a way for Myanmar women to avoid drug and AIDS risks in marriage.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to understand some of the structural processes shaping the growth trend of women from northern Myanmar marrying men in southwestern Yunnan province in China. The focus has been on demographic statistics, analyses the development trends of China-Myanmar transnational marriage and the demographic and sociopolitical reasons. As a type Asian transnational marriage migration, China-Myanmar transnational marriages show the same growth and feminization trends, seen in the growing numbers of women from Myanmar marrying men in Yunnan. By using push-pull theory and demographic statistics and trends from China and

Myanmar, key structural reasons for the growth in traditional cross-border ethnic intermarriage include economic disparity between China and Myanmar; gender imbalance and marriage squeeze in China; the civil war and persecution of AIDS and drugs in northern Myanmar lead to the expansion of China-Myanmar transnational marriages with a feminization trend.

In addition, another structural factor, national laws, regulations and policies also contribute to shaping and influencing China-Myanmar transnational marriage. While analyzing the phenomenon of "Burmese brides" in this chapter, it is found that most marriages and identities of "Burmese brides" are in an undocumented status, which may be considered as "illegal" in China. Therefore, the next chapter will focus on this issue, aiming to examine China-Myanmar transnational marriage in relation to national law and policy in the next chapter.



## Chapter 3 Constructing China-Myanmar transnational marriage within national legal frameworks

### 3.1 Introduction

Laws and regulations are an important structural factor shaping the phenomenon of “Burmese brides”. Although more and more Myanmar women are married to Chinese men in the Yunnan border areas, most of their marriages are considered as “illegal” due to the lack of a formal marriage certificate. This document has become more important as the Myanmar-China border and concerns over the location and movement of people near the border have become more regulated. For these undocumented marriages, marriage partners are in a marital state while lacking a marriage certificate. This is called a “common-law marriage” or “de facto marriage” (*shishi hunyin* 事实婚姻) in China. Since such undocumented marriages are not recognized and protected by law and regulations, it may leave the both marriage partners and their family in a weak position and create more social problems. In my interviews with 20 Myanmar women married to Chinese men, 11 people did not have a marriage certificate, including all 8 women in rural marriages and 3 women in urban marriages (For more details on this, please see Chapter 5). Since more than half of the Myanmar women's marriages are undocumented it is a big problem.

In order to better understand how and why they did not obtain a legal marriage certificate, this chapter first overviews the condition of these undocumented marriages on the Myanmar-Yunnan border by analyzing relevant official statistical data from Yunnan; Secondly, the chapter looks at the legal process for acquiring a legal marriage status for these Myanmar women, examining how to obtain legal marriage certificates in Myanmar, China or in a third country based on existing laws and regulations concerning marriage. Then, the chapter looks at the reasons for the existence of numerous undocumented marriages from perspectives of Myanmar, China and the international community based on the policies and debates in

Myanmar, China, and the international community, and on the real experience of 20 respondents and the legal documents I collected in my field work.

Furthermore, this chapter considers whether the current legal framework is appropriate to manage the growth of the “Burmese brides” since more and more Myanmar women marry Chinese men, more and more of their marriages are considered “illegal”. That is to say, the chapter asks whether the legal framework adequately addresses and manages the “Burmese brides” phenomenon beyond simply defining these undocumented marriages as “illegal”. Hence, this chapter also combines with reports and case studies from mass media, government or NGO reports to analyze the applicability of legal framework.

### **3.2 Definitions of concepts for the legal framework of transnational marriage**

#### **3.2.1 Border areas**

The border between China and Myanmar is 2186 kilometers, most of which -- 1997 kilometers -- is with Yunnan province. Transnational marriages between China and Myanmar mostly occur across the middle and southern part of the border between Yunnan Province and Myanmar. Much of the rest of the border is covered by the 4000 meter and Gaoligong Mountain and the Hengduan mountains at the junction of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (Yue 2014, 10). These plateaus, snow-capped mountains and rivers form natural barriers that make it difficult to cross; in the middle and southern part of the Yunnan border area between China and Myanmar, the terrain is relatively flat, rivers are not too turbulent, so it is easier to cross the border making it easier for more transnational marriages, too.

To better understand the transnational marriages between China and Myanmar in southwestern Yunnan, this thesis focuses on the frontier between Yunnan Province and Myanmar, mainly those areas connecting with China and Myanmar. The six prefectures on the China side include Nujiang, Baoshan, Dehong, Lincang, Simao and Xishuangbanna. In Myanmar, there are two states, Kachin State and Shan State. As shown in Figure 5:

Figure 5 China-Myanmar border areas



Statistical data show that by 2015, the total number of transnational marriages in eight border cities in Yunnan Province (including Honghe prefecture and Wenshan prefecture, both connected with Laos and Vietnam) was 45,009, a figure that accounts for 98.02% of the total number of transnational marriages in Yunnan province. Most of those marriages were concentrated in: Dehong prefecture, with 13,187, or 28.72%, followed by Baoshan City, with 8,543 or 18.61%, then by Lincang City, with 7884 or 17.17% (Chen 2018, 122). And most of those transnational marriages in these three prefectures are between China and Myanmar. This is the reason why I chose Dehong and Baoshan as the sites for my field work.

### 3.2.2 Border people

To understand China-Myanmar transnational marriage, it is crucial to understand the term "border people", which refers to people living within 60 kilometers of the border line. China-Myanmar border people could be Burmese or Chinese, as long as they live within 60 kilometers of the border line.

The local governments and national governments in both Myanmar and China have different policies and laws for border control. To promote the friendly development of the border areas between the two countries, "border people" enjoy the preferential policies of the two countries. In border areas, "border people" are treated different from ordinary citizens. Once border people get the relevant border residential

certificate like entry-exit permit (shown in Figure 6), it will be easier for them to travel between the border areas of the two countries and to shuttle across the boundary. In transnational marriages between China and Myanmar, if both parties in the marriage are classed as “border people”, they can enjoy a simpler process of marriage registration than that of non-border people who choose to marry.

*Figure 6 Entry-exit Permit of Border People in China and Myanmar*



*Note: The left one is entry and exit permit hold by Chinese border people; The middle one is entry and exit permit hold by Myanmar border people; The right one is temporary borderpass hold by Myanmar border people. (Source from the internet.)*

### 3.2.3 Transnational marriage

“Transnational marriage” is a marriage made by two people of different nationalities. Sometimes it is called “cross-border marriage” or “international marriage”. In this thesis, transnational marriage mainly refers to marriages made by people from China and those from Myanmar. From a legal perspective, these marriages can be divided into illegal transnational marriages and legal transnational marriages.

## 3.3 Border with many illegal undocumented transnational marriages

### 3.3.1 Definition of “Illegal”

Generally speaking, transnational marriage mainly involves citizens of two countries, so transnational marriage should be bound by the laws of both countries. In this chapter, the definition of “illegal” mainly refers to the violation of relevant laws of

Myanmar or China. Since there is no unified marriage law in Myanmar, it can only use relevant anti-trafficking regulations. China's marriage laws mainly include "Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China" (*Zhong Hua Ren Min Gong He Guo Hun Yin Fa*), "Marriage Registration Regulations" (*Hun Yin Deng Ji Tiao Li*), "Nationality Law of the People's Republic of China" (*Zhong Hua Ren Min Gong He Guo Guo Ji Fa*), "Measures for the Administration of Examination and Approval of Foreigners' Permanent Residence in China" (*Wai Guo Ren Zai Zhong Guo Yong Jiu Ju Liu Shen Pi Guan Li Ban Fa*), "Measures for Marriage Registration for Border People in China and Adjacent Countries" (*Zhong Guo Bian Min Yu Pi Lin Guo Bian Min Hun Yin Deng Ji Ban Fa*). The above laws and regulations characterize a transnational marriage as "illegal" firstly based on whether the Myanmar spouse's entry into China as an immigrant is legal or not. Secondly, even if the Myanmar spouse legally enters China, it also depends on whether the Myanmar spouse can legally reside in China for a long or short time. Third, even if the Myanmar spouse can legally reside in China, it still depends on whether the both marriage partners can obtain the marriage certificate or marriage registration record according to the relevant marriage law from the Chinese government.

Second, the phenomenon of "Burmese brides" is often discussed in terms of human rights and is of concern in the international community. Therefore, "illegal" can also be defined as violation of the relevant UN convention on human rights, such as the Palermo Protocol on trafficking in persons.

Finally, in this thesis, "illegal" is also a stereotype of Burmese brides. Because some of them are always shown in media as having been trafficked and abused, many in Myanmar, China and the international community have a fixed image of "Burmese brides" as *all* "illegal" and their marriages also are unlawful.

Explanations of "illegal" can vary, but from the perspective of national managements and laws, whether a transnational marriage is "illegal" is mainly depends on whether the marriage partners hold a valid marriage certificate or not. The valid marriage certificate could come from China, Myanmar or a third-party country. Holding a valid marriage certificate means that this transnational marriage is legal. If there is no valid marriage certificate, it means that this marriage is illegal and such marriage can also be understood as "undocumented marriage".

### **3.3.2 The prominence of undocumented marriages**

At present, transnational marriage between people from China and Myanmar is often portrayed as a social and human rights issue for China, Myanmar and the UN. Statistics indicate there are many illegal undocumented transnational marriages on the China side, especially in border areas. Undocumented marriages are not protected by law, and this will damage the rights of both marriage partners. Data from Yunnan given below shows the extent of this problem,

The incomplete survey data of Lincang People's Congress in Yunnan Province showed that by the end of 2009, 3888 China-Myanmar transnational marriages could be confirmed in Lincang City, of which 1605 (41.3%) were registered in the related governmental departments, and 2283 (58.7%) were not registered (Zhao 2011, 93).

In Jinghong City, Xishuangbanna state, Yunnan Province, the survey data of transnational marriages among China-Myanmar border people demonstrated that by the end of 2009, there were 505 transnational marriages between border people in 9 townships of Jinghong City. The marriages between China and Myanmar border people accounted for 97%. Among them, 123 couples handled marriage certificates according to law, accounting for 24.43% of the total number of transnational marriages. 382 couples did not apply marriage certificates, accounting for 75.57% of the total number of transnational marriages (Zhao 2011, 93).

As of August 2010, a survey by Wenyi Yang, a Chinese scholar, firstly to Baoshan City obtained statistical data from Longling Civil Affairs Bureau. It told that 710 China-Myanmar transnational marriages in Longling County had been registered following the law, accounting for 32% of the total marriages, and 1,511 of them belonged to cohabitation relationship which didn't get the marriage certificates, accounted for 68%. Then, the school got the data from another county in Baoshan city named Tengchong County. According to the County Civil Affairs Bureau, the number of China-Myanmar transnational marriages without marriage certificates in Tengchong County is 1,127, accounting for 71%. Moreover, in Baoshan City, from 2006 to August 2010, only one couple of transnational marriages between China and Myanmar were legally registered, which showed that the issuance rate of transnational marriage certificates in the city is too low, and the most marriages belong to undocumented marriages (Yang 2011, 48).

In addition, a report about transnational marriage management of border people from the General Office of Yunnan Provincial Committee in 2015 pointed out that 95% of foreign border people who married in Yunnan did not have legal entry certificates, and they did not enter China through legal ports. In these transnational marriages, due to the strict border control and management of Vietnam and Laos, most of the immigrants can hold legal identity certificates, while most of the border people in Myanmar can't hold valid identity certificates because of the control of local ethnic armed forces (Chen 2018, 128). A valid certificate of identification is a necessary condition for legal transnational marriage registration. Without a legal identity certificate, it generally results in the inability to hold a legal entry certificate, the legal residence permit, and even if the marriage certificate.

In short, we can see that most of the transnational marriages of people between Yunnan province and Myanmar are both undocumented and illegal. This kind of marriage is not protected and recognized by law, but the marriage partners are in a "common law" or "de facto" marital state, known as *shishi hunyin* in China.

### **3.4 Making marriages legal: constructing China-Myanmar transnational marriage**

Illegal transnational marriage increases the vulnerability of Myanmar women in Chinese society. Since they don't hold a legal marriage certificate, even though they have settled in China and often have given birth to children there, their marriage is still in a state of “de facto marriage” (*shishi hunyin*) that is not protected and recognized by Chinese law. The absence of a marriage certificate means that it is not possible to register in Chinese household registration system (*hukou*). They will not be able to enjoy most of the legal protection and preferential policies in China, including land distribution, employment, children's enrollment, medical care, endowment insurance, etc. In this way, there is no guarantee for the stability of the lives of own and their Chinese family relations (Zhang and Bao 2013, 89). This shows that the official legal marriage certificate is very important for Myanmar women who have settled in China with their Chinese husbands. In the border areas, China-Myanmar transnational marriages are often illegal and undocumented, indicating that there is a problem in matching the law to people's marriage practices. To understand the emergence of this problem, it is useful to know how to get a legal marriage status, to see how the legal process for acquiring marriage certificates works. Secondly, it is important to find out why these marriages becoming illegal under this process.

#### **3.4.1 Legal framework**

How to get a certificate for a legal marriage? Both husband and wife need go to the relevant government department to register their marriage and to obtain an official marriage certificate. There are three ways to legally register a China-Myanmar transnational marriage: One is to register the marriage in Myanmar, one is to register marriage in China, and a third is to register marriage in a third country. Families of Chinese men and Myanmar women who live in China who use the first or third method of registration and marriage only need to hand in the marriage certificate obtained in Myanmar or a third country to the Chinese Embassy for fairness,



certification and translation. Then their marriage will be recognized by the Chinese government.

*i. Obtaining Marriage Certificate in Myanmar*

At present, it is not feasible to obtain a legal transnational marriage certificate in Myanmar, especially for the marriage between Myanmar women and foreigners. During the ruling period of the military government that started in 1998, an order was issued prohibiting Myanmar women from marrying foreigners (Belak 2002, 238). The order was promulgated because of an incident that occurred in 26 May 1998 when some Taiwanese brokers colluded with Myanmar brokers to abduct and sell Myanmar women. Later, the order was issued by the supreme court of Myanmar to all states and divisions courts and all township courts showed in the *letter number 3604/Su 14 "gange" 86/98*:

*"...marriage of a Burmese woman to a foreigner nor marry any Burmese woman to any foreigner. Action will effectively be taken against any staff of any court who neglects to abide by this order to dismiss them from their duty..."* (Belak 2002, 220).

Moreover, *Decree 3/98* issued on July 1, 1998 stipulated the court's requirement to register all marriages while being sworn before the judge so court officials should be careful when issuing related marriage proofs. Even Myanmar foreign embassies have been ordered not to register transnational marriages between their women and foreigners (Belak 2002, 220-221).

Myanmar's legal system is complex and messy, often conflicting and inconsistently applicable. During the early military government's administration, laws and regulations could be replaced at will (Belak 2002, 226). Therefore, although orders had been introduced to all courts early in the era, the implementation of these orders varied from region to region. There is an unconfirmed claim that despite the order in 1998, Myanmar law allows marriages between Myanmar citizens and foreigners as long as the parties notify the district court 21 days in advance. This claim was also

reported in May 2010 by the Myanmar newspaper *Irrawaddy.com*. The media also pointed out that the government of Myanmar has signaled the other authorities of Myanmar to prohibit the holding of marriage ceremony for their women and foreign men, on the grounds of preventing and combating trafficking in women (Thae 2010). In fact, there is a huge controversy over this prohibition. Most objections come from those who support Myanmar women who really love their foreign husbands. They believe that this prohibition violates the rights of women in Myanmar to freedom of life.

Up to now, the Myanmar government still forbids marriages between women in Myanmar and men in foreign countries. Relevant government departments still refuse to process marriage documents for Myanmar women. However, recent news from the China Consulate in Mandalay on June 1, 2019 included some possible change. It included a reminder that Chinese citizens going to Myanmar to find a girlfriend could provide an explanation for this. The news report also noted the second part of the regulations for marriage registration (one in customary laws) at the county level department between non-Buddhist men and Buddhist women also could apply to marriages between Chinese men and Myanmar women. This means that some county level departments -- such as court judges -- in Myanmar could allow these marriages and recognize them as legal (China Consulate in Mandalay 2019). We can see the regulations in this news report are contrary to the previous order and national law preventing Myanmar from marrying foreign men. Whether it is a national-level prohibition or the local department office's consent, the conflict between Myanmar laws shows that it is not possible to choose to register the marriage between Myanmar women and Chinese men in Myanmar.

## ***ii. Obtaining Marriage Certificate in China***

For the above reasons, it is easier to obtain a legal marriage certificates in China than in Myanmar. There are clear laws in China that stipulate the conditions for

applying for a transnational marriage certificate (see Figure 7). At present, there are two ways for Myanmar women and their Chinese husbands to apply for a Chinese marriage certificate in the border area: One is to follow the national marriage law which apply to whole China, such as: “Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China” (*Zhong Hua Ren Min Gong He Guo Hun Yin Fa*), “Marriage Registration Regulations” (*Hun Yin Deng Ji Tiao Li*). Another way is to follow the special regulations of the border areas. Due to the implementation of regional autonomy in China, local governments are empowered to implement their own laws in their jurisdictions. Such laws and regulations apply only to specific areas. In border areas, to facilitate the “border people”, the laws have been simplified into “Measures for Marriage Registration for Border People in China and Adjacent Countries” (*Zhong Guo Bian Min Yu Pi Lin Guo Bian Min Hun Yin Deng Ji Ban Fa*).

*Figure 7 Marriage Certificate of a Myanmar Woman and a Chinese Issued by China*



*Note: This picture is from respondent TU2 in the fieldwork of Tengchong. She asked her friend at home to send a marriage certificate to her and showed to me since the day that I interviewed her, she didn't take it. To protect the privacy of respondents, the picture was digitally altered.*

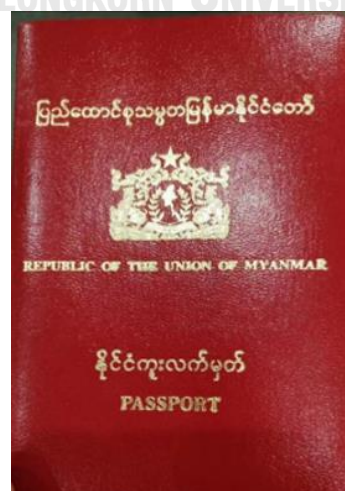
(1) According to the National Marriage Law, Myanmar women who apply for marriage certificate are required to provide the following documents (translated by the author into English):

- a. Passport or other identity or nationality certificate;
- b. Aliens' residence permit issued by the public security organs of China, or identity certificates, or temporary entry and residence certificates issued by the foreign affairs department of China;
- c. Certificate of marital status that notarized from the Myanmar notary office certified by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar (or departments authorized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar) and China Embassy and Consulate in Myanmar; or Certificate of marital status issued by the Myanmar embassy or consulate in China.

(2) According to the latest provisions of “Measures for Marriage Registration for Border People in China and Adjacent Countries” (hereinafter referred to as the “New Measures”), Myanmar women who apply for marriage certificates are required to provide the following documents:

- a. A valid passport, international travel document or entry and exit permit in border area or Myanmar identity document (also called as “*Ma bang ding*”); (see Figure 8).

*Figure 8 Myanmar Woman's Passport gotten from fieldwork in Ruili*



*Note: Passport issued by Myanmar government has different types. This passport is from an interviewed Myanmar woman who married to Chinese man in Ruili.*

b. Certificate of single marital status that notarized from the Myanmar notary office (or authorized department) certified by China Embassy and Consulate in Myanmar or Myanmar Embassy and Consulate in China; or single certificate issued by Myanmar Embassy and Consulate in China; or single certificate issued by the Myanmar local government in Myanmar border area which is at the same level as China township government. (see Figure 9).

Figure 9 Samples of a “single certificate” of a Myanmar woman



Note: The left shows the Myanmar version of a “single certificate”; the right shows the English version of a “single certificate”. The two pictures are from my fieldwork in Ruili. To protect the privacy of respondents, the pictures were digitally altered.

These “New Measures” are the result of the simplified application procedure of marriage registration for the border people of China and Myanmar from China government for the sake of humanity considerations. Prior to October 2012, the marriage registration and management of border people followed “Measures for Marriage Registration for Border People in China and Adjacent Countries 1995” (hereinafter referred to as the “Old Measures”). In the “Old Measures”, the Myanmar women must submit at least four kinds of documents and certificates including:

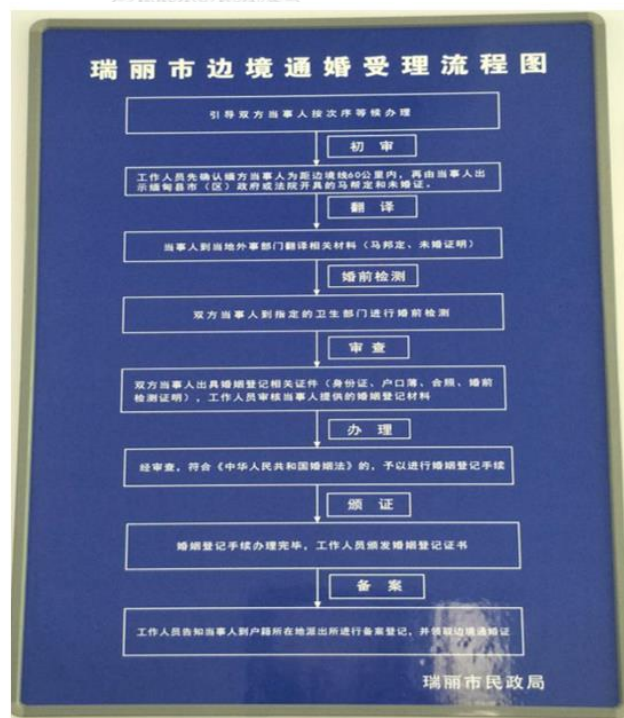
- a. Myanmar passport or exit-entry permission in border area;
- b. Myanmar identity document (also called as “Ma bang ding”);

c. A certificate of marital status that issued by the border county (city, district) government of Myanmar notarized by notary office, and a certificate agreeing to marry a Chinese border people;

d. A certificate of premarital health check issued by designated hospitals of China border counties (city, district).

In particular, current “New Measures” simplifies documents that Myanmar women have to submit, but there are also some different requirements in the various border local government departments. For example, in this thesis's fieldwork in Dehong Prefecture, I learned from the Ruili Civil Administration Department that they only accept transnational marriages between both countries border people in the area within 60 kilometers of the border line, and Myanmar applicants only need to provide 2 official documents: Myanmar ID card and a certificate of being single (unmarried). The specific process is shown in Figure 10.

*Figure 10 Marriage Registration Process of China and Myanmar Border People in Ruili*



*Note: The photo is taken in Ruili civil affairs department.*



I learned from the Dehong Prefecture Civil Affairs Department of (located in Mangshi City) that they accept the registration of all transnational marriages in whole Dehong Prefecture, but the marriages of non-border people beyond 60 kilometers of the border line must be registered here because other local departments have no authority to do that. In the prefecture-level civil affairs department, Myanmar women need to provide three materials that need to be translated: Myanmar identity card, border entry-exit permit and single certificate. The specific process is shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11 The Marriage Registration Process of China and Myanmar Border People in Dehong Prefecture



Note: The photo is taken in Dehong civil affairs department in Mangshi City.

Comparing figures 10 and 11 shows that in Dehong autonomous prefecture, the Civil Affairs Departments at the autonomous prefecture level and the local civil affairs departments at the border have different requirements for registering China-Myanmar transnational marriages. The local civil affairs departments at the border region only accepts the registration of transnational marriages between the Chinese and Myanmar border people, and the process and document requirements are more

simplified. The civil affairs departments at the autonomous prefecture level accept transnational marriage registrations not only from border people, but also from people who are non-border areas within its jurisdictions. But the process and document requirements are more complex.

At present, China's household registration (*hukou*) system and the ID card system have become more and more comprehensive, and most Chinese citizens have ID cards and household registration books. For a transnational marriage, the requirements for a Chinese husband are: a. household registration book and ID card; b. signature declaring he has no other spouse and is without direct blood affinity or collateral consanguinity within three generations with the Myanmar woman. In addition, there is a fixed age requirement to obtain a marriage certificate in China: the man needs to be at least 22 years old; the woman must be at least 20 years old.

### ***iii. Obtaining Marriage Certificate in a third country***

It is theoretically possible to register marriage in a third country. After applying for marriage certificate in a third country, it can be certified, notarized and translated by the Chinese Embassy in that country. And then, the couple can take all documents and return to the civil affairs or public security department of the place where the Chinese husband's residence registration to modify the marital status. After reading many Burmese people's experiences of registering marriages abroad in online forums, I found that marriage registration in Thailand and Singapore is most popular for those Myanmar women who want to get married and foreign men (not only Chinese men). This is because the registration of transnational marriage is relatively clear and simple in these two countries. Here is how this process works in detail.

**Case 1** Marriage registration in Thailand: Requirements for foreigners (Source from *Thai Embassy website*):

**a.** A copy of their passport along with arrival card



- b. Affidavit regarding the marital status of the person from the respective embassy
  - c. Translated copy of affidavits to Thai certified by an approved Foreign Ministry Translator
- (Age requirement: either male or female should not be less than 17 years old, or should be at the marriageable age)

**Case 2** Marriage registration in Singapore: Requirements for Foreigners (Source from *Registry of Marriages* Singapore website (ROM))

- a. If any party wishing to marry is not a Singapore citizen or permanent resident, one of the parties must have resided in Singapore for at least 15 days prior to the submission of the marriage notice. And these 15 days must be continuous.
  - b. Passports of groom, bride and 2 witnesses above 21 years old
  - c. Solemnizer Consent Form
  - d. Credit card for online filing of notice; or NETs/ Cashcard for filing of notice at e-Kiosks in ROM
  - e. If applicable, death certificate of late spouse or divorce papers
- (Age requirements: both parties are 21 years of age or older, and other regulations are required for both parties aged 18-21 or under)

To sum up, apart from the age limit, to register an international marriage in Thailand, you only need to hold three paper documents, passport and arrival card, marital status certificate, Translated copy of affidavits into Thai; to register an international marriage in Singapore, with the exception of financial requirements, in fact, a first marriage couple only need passport of themselves and two witnesses and stay in Singapore least continuous 15 days, because Solemnizer consent form is easy to acquire: ROM on its official website gives a List of licensed Solemnizers, the both parties need to choose and invite one of them and request a consent form.

Superficially, registering in third country is not cumbersome towards to the requirement of applying for marriage certificate, but it is not a good method because the cost of time or money is not low.

### **3.4.2 Causes for the illegal existence of numerous undocumented marriages**

There are many reasons for the increase and prevalence of illegal marriages between Myanmar women and men in southwestern Yunnan. The section to follow analyzes this from three aspects:

#### *i. Causes from Myanmar side*

**a.** Ethnic minority women in northern Myanmar face difficulties in obtaining and identification (ID card or passport) and marital status (single certificate) documentation from the Myanmar government.

As can be seen from the legal framework for applying for legal marriage, the most important thing is that both applicants hold necessary identification. At present, most of the reports from Chinese scholars or some official reports from Yunnan government show that the main reason why most couples of Myanmar women and Chinese men cannot be legally registered in China is that Myanmar women cannot provide identification (ID card, passport or border Exit entry permit) and single certificate from Myanmar government (Chen 2018, 127).

The problem of Myanmar women's difficulty in obtaining identity cards or passports still exists today, especially among women in ethnic minority areas. According to Myanmar's 2014 census data, nearly one-third of Myanmar's population does not have sufficient identity and civil documents. Of these, 54% are women. This is more common for women who lived in remote or conflict-affected areas, or are homeless, or belonged to stateless ethnic group and so on face the consequences of unsafe legal status. (UNHCR and UN Women 2018). Ethnic issues (ethnic conflicts, racial discrimination), inconsistent legal standards, corruption of some officials, poverty and other issues directly contribute to the plight of Myanmar women who

cannot obtain identity CARDS or passports. Around the 1980s, ID cards had been hard to get in conflict zones, remote areas and ethnic minority areas. Although the government at the time claimed that the township authorities would be responsible regularly grant new ID cards, in areas where conflicts persist in Mon, Karen, Karenni, Shan and Chin states, officials rarely visited these areas. Those who were eager to receive an ID card must pay themselves to go to the town center (Belak 2002, 196-197).

Furthermore, so far, Myanmar has used the Citizenship Law of 1982 to divide the types of ID card into three categories according to their color: pink for full citizens (also called as “citizens”), blue for associate citizens, and green for naturalized citizens. It is worth noting that in a special period, the government will issue special ID cards to different ethnic minority group. The card holder's name, picture, location and date of birth, parent's name and ethnicity will be displayed on the ID card (Belak 2002, 231). Each type of ID card has different rights for holders. Ethnic group and descent are the main criteria for obtaining citizenship in Myanmar. Therefore, it is very important to confirm and fully prove the citizenship of their ancestor's ethnicity and citizenship (UNHCR and UN Women 2018). The identity system is considered discriminatory against people in Myanmar who are not full citizens and women who do not have an identity card, something that is common in for many non-Burmese minorities groups in rural areas (Belak 2002, 231). More often, women in conflict areas, remote areas and ethnic minority areas, lack of education and so are not clear about the conditions and functions of the identity documents, which made them don't how significance of processing a ID card (UNHCR and UN Women 2018).

The Government of Myanmar provides for three basic types of passports: work passport, visit passport (for People traveling and students studying overseas), dependent passport. But sometimes it will issue some specific short-term business passports. In recent years, Myanmar passports have become increasingly difficult to

obtain. Since May 1996, women under the age of 30 are not able to apply for a working passport, only those who are formally funded by the government can issue passports that allow them to study abroad. The government has restricted the passports to women, limiting the basic rights of women in Myanmar to the freedom of movement (Belak 2002, 231). The cases discussed below show some of these complexities.

**Case 3** Respondent *TU2* in my filed work in Tengchong city. She is from Kutkai, Shan state and belongs to the Kokong ethnic group. She said,

*“I hold all my identity documents (ID cards, passports). Thanks to my parents, before I was born, they tried their best to get their ID card. So I successfully applied for my ID card, except for waiting time is a little bit long. But some of my friends are not so lucky. It is not easy to apply for an identity card for Kokong people in Myanmar, or it should be said that only Bamar people is easy to get...Our Kokong people generally requires a high fee and a long time to apply for an ID card. It cost about 500,000 kyats [\$330] in the early years, but now it's much cheaper than before, about 200,000-300,000 kyats [\$132~198]; the time spent is about 2 months or 2 years, depending on whether you can find a middleman who has extensive network and resources to help you. If someone helps you, you may get your ID card quickly. If not, you will have to wait indefinitely...”*

Because the Myanmar government has not supported the marriage of Myanmar women and foreign men as mentioned earlier, it has indicated that all relevant staff of the relevant courts have no right to accept any vows or marriage applications from Myanmar women to foreigners, nor to marry Myanmar women to any foreigners. Therefore, they getting a single certificate is very difficult for Myanmar women for foreign marriages since this is seen to protect these women from possible human trafficking. For example, in 2014, Myanmar authorities banned all local authorities

from issuing any related marriage documents for marriage migrants (Chen 2018, 158), which included no issuance of single certificates.

Even though Myanmar law does not allow authorities to issue the single certificate, the Myanmar women I interviewed who had married with Chinese men could show me their single certificate pictures (see figure 3.4) in my fieldwork. I discuss these cases below as showing the conflict between actual practices and law.

**Case 4** Respondent *TU3* in my fieldwork in Tengchong city. She is from Myitkyina, Kachin State and belongs to the Kachin ethnic group. She told me that,

*“My mother is Kokong people, but my father is Kachin people. My dad helped me get my ID card with his family ties and materials, which said I was Kachin people. I also got my passport before I came to China, but I paid \$50. I got a Chinese marriage certificate last year (May 2017). But before that, the document I had been lacked was single certificate. Later, under the introduction of a friend, I got the help of an agency. The agency charged me 250,000 kyats [\$65] and promised to help me get the single certificate and complete the consular certification and translation work. I don't know how this agency does it, but it works.”*

The inconsistency and contradiction not only is confusing and shows the difficulties of Myanmar women to apply for related legal materials but also the higher cost.

**Case 5** Respondent *TU1* in my fieldwork in Tengchong city. She is from Namhkan, Shan state and belongs to Kokong ethnic group. She said,

*“I have got a marriage certificate now. But getting it was not easy. Before I decided to apply it with my husband, I did not have any documents. I also asked my family of Myanmar to consult the local government (in Myanmar) several times and got nothing. Later, one of my female friends who also married to Chinese man told me to find an agency. The agency has a way to do it. After that, I found one who asked for a service*

*fee of 8,600 RMB [\\$1245], plus a cost of 300,000 kyats [\\$198] for documents. And he would help me get my ID card, single certificate, passport and visa. I forgot how long I waited, but he did help me, and the documents were not faked. . . This cost is really high, but if I go to handle it myself, I have to go back to Myanmar several times and am uncertain I could do it. Probably, my travel expenses will be higher than this price.”*

**b. Myanmar women lack legal awareness about applying for legal marriage certificate**

First of all, there is no uniform marriage law in Myanmar. Although the Supreme Court has ordered all marriages to be registered, there is no uniform standard to regulate these marriages. Different ethnic groups and different religious groups follow their own traditional customs and religious norms. The current regulations on marriage in Myanmar are mainly customary law and the individual religious marriage acts. Customary law also known as family law is recognized by the court and applies to matters relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance and adoption, also known as family law (Belak 2002, 230), such as the 1899 Christian Marriage Act, the 1874 Married Women's Property Act, the 1872 Special Marriage Act, the 1954 Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Inheritance Act and so on. And compliance with the law or religious norms depends to a certain extent on the community (Belak 2002, 239-239).

Marriage proof is one of the problems in Myanmar's customary law. Different religions and different ethnic groups have different understandings of what constitutes marriage. Some believe that if there has been a communal wedding celebration, informing the community that the couple is husband and wife, etc., a marriage will be recognized locally, but this does not produce the effects or the documents needed to officially obtain a legal certificate as evidence of marriage. For example, a marriage between two Burmese Buddhists can be considered effective with the consent of both parties, even without the need for ceremonies. But with the progress of the times, most weddings are proved by holding a celebration, performance show or entertainment,

especially for young people in Myanmar now. They like to sign affidavits in front of judges or magistrates, friends and family, elders to show their ability and willingness to marry (Oo 2012, 7). Although affidavits can be considered a legally sacred proof of marriage, strictly speaking, it is not a legally recognized marriage certificate, because it is more equivalent to a letter of intent to marry or engagement. Therefore, the above examples show that in Myanmar culture, there is often no need to obtain marriage certificates, let alone the awareness of getting a marriage certificate. In remote areas with ethnic minority groups, where people lack education due to armed conflict or live far away from government supervision, the awareness of how to obtain a marriage certificate is even weaker.

**Case 6** Respondent *RRI* in my fieldwork from Ruili city. Namhkam, Shan state and belong to Shan ethnic group. Until now, she does not hold a marriage certificate. When I asked her why she did not get the it, she answered me that,

*“To be honest, I don't think it is necessary. We (she and her husband) have already held a wedding ceremony in our village (Nongdao village of Ruili city, her husband's residence place), and the whole village knows that we are husband and wife. Moreover, now I have a "red book" (a kind of entry and exit permit in border with one-year validity and can be renewed), which means I can legally stay in China. And I heard that it is very troublesome to apply a marriage certificate, so my husband and I do not consider it at present.”*

## **ii. Causes from China side**

When seen from China, the “illegal” performance of the bride's transnational marriage is mainly manifested through relevant laws and regulations of China. Of course, the enactment of a law is bound to be influenced by various factors, such as national sovereignty, population security and population quality. But China's laws and regulations on this issue do have a bias. When china handling related human Trafficking cases, western powers showed a suspicious attitude. Because they think

the ways of China carrying out the laws violate the rights of the victims and others. There is no doubt that the Chinese government make efforts in the fighting against human trafficking, but China government more hope to own its system of criminal interdiction can conform to the international and Palermo trafficking protocol - driven standards (Hackney 2015, 7). Therefore, this kind of transnational marriage policies and laws trend more to prevent or crack down on some crimes that use marriage to cover up, naturally ignoring the people who voluntarily get married. However, it is worth noting that, gradually, Chinese scholars begun to realize the existence of voluntary marriages, and they started to voice the legalization of non-forced marriage.

On the other hand, the Chinese government's demands for legal transnational marriages are not very high. According to the latest act called "Measures for Marriage Registration for Bordering People in China and Adjacent Countries". Myanmar woman only need to provide official identification or passport, as well as single proofs, then you can register your marriage in China. However, the key to the problem lies in the attitude of the Myanmar government. They are reluctant to handle these documents and materials for their women. The reason should be traced back to the 1980 s, the related data shows, in that period, there were a lot of women married into the territory of China, instead of Chinese women married into Myanmar, and this formed an one-way migration mobility. That has led to a gender imbalance in the Myanmar border regions, where Myanmar men couldn't a wife to marry. Aiming at this phenomenon, the Myanmar government dealt with the Chinese government at that time. After that, Chinese government is no longer accepted such transnational marriages. But because there also is a serious population imbalance in China border areas that men can't find wives, therefore, the Chinese government showed an attitude of "do not advocate, do not against" towards to the problem (Yue 2014, 24). And this could also explain a phenomenon that before the implementation of "Measures for Marriage Registration for Bordering People in China and Adjacent Countries" in 1995, there were a lot of Myanmar women to obtain a lawful marriage and identity, but after



that, the most married Myanmar women were considered illegal in China. This is in line with the results of field surveys by most Chinese scholars.

At present, the Chinese government has realized that more and more undocumented marriages in China-Myanmar border, in order to prevent social problems and maintain border security, also for humane considerations that protect the rights of Myanmar women and help them obtain legal status, the Chinese government also has made many changes. As mentioned earlier, in 2012, the government simplified the application process and required submissions for transnational marriage of border people. In addition, local governments in border areas will introduce some local policies and regulations to help solve these problems. For example, Dehong Autonomous Prefecture, in 9 September 2010, has promulgated a marriage registration filing policy called "Regulations on the Administration of marriage filing registration certificate of Border people in Dehong Autonomous Prefecture (Trial Implementation)" (*De Hong Zhou Bian Min Ru Jing Tong Hun Bei An Deng Ji Zheng Guan Li Gui Ding (Shi Xing)*) in order to solve the problem that Myanmar women can't obtain marriage certificates due to lack Myanmar identity cards, passports, entry and exit permits, as well as to strengthen border population supervision. And in 1<sup>st</sup> November 2010, the police stations of the whole prefecture began centralized processing of the marriage filing registration certificate (*Bian Min Ru Jing Tong Hun Bei An Deng Ji Zheng*) (Dong 2013, 42). This regulation facilitates those who are unable to apply for a marriage certificate: as long as the couple can provide a cohabitation certificate in the name of husband and wife issued by the village committee in the place where the permanent residence of one party with Chinese Nationality is located. After acceptance and verification by the police station, the applicant will be issued marriage filing registration certificate.

Myanmar people holding this certificate may reside, do business, work and pass within the administrative area of Dehong Prefecture, and enjoy the rights and interests of the Chinese laws and regulations as well as those granted by the local government

to foreign border residents. Compared with those without the filing certificates, the holders have expanded their scope of travel and acquired more rights, thus guaranteed more their basic life. And their children born in China can register in *Hukou* system with their Chinese father or mother (Zhang and Bao 2013, 87). This Regulation has greatly helped Myanmar women who cannot legally marry Chinese men in Dehong because they do not have access to Myanmar identity cards but now, at least they can have more freedom and rights guarantee. It is worth noting that this marriage filing certificate is not equivalent to a marriage certificate and cannot be used as legal evidence for legal marital relationship.

### *iii. Causes from international community*

The international community in consciousness more prefers regarding "Burmese brides" as a kind of illegal phenomenon. Of course, this maybe because their work is payed more attention to human rights issues, such as: human trafficking, women's aid and so on. The United Nations describes Myanmar as a source of human trafficking, and police statistics show that 3,489 victims were rescued between 2006 and 2016. Most of them were trafficked into forced marriages, the prostitution was second, followed by forced labor. And police records also show that china is the main destination of those trafficking victims, Thailand and Malaysia were followed. So, in this condition, the international community and Myanmar government thinking "Burmese brides" as illegal seems to be understandable, but this kind of consciousness only focuses on the Burmese women trafficked, directly excludes Burmese women who voluntarily married.

Here is a true case from a report of Pulitzer Center Website: Tong Zong Lui, a girl from Kachin state. In 1993, she came to Longchuan village in Yunnan Province, met with local Chinese resident Yong Ma Yue, and finally hoped to get married. But she can't get the materials from the Myanmar government. The report pointed out that for

the Kachin women, if they want to marry a foreigner, they have to travel to Kachin state capital Myitkyina which is under control of Myanmar government. And there, they must get the admission that they are the inhabitants of Myanmar. But even if they could get a legitimate Myanmar identity card, the Myanmar government would not be willing to file a document stating that they were unmarried. Because the government thinks the documents could be used for human trafficking. The Myanmar government has banned wedding ceremonies between Burmese women and foreign men (Chen 2013). But the problem is why the government is refusal to provide evidence. There are no exact standards, and there is no corresponding explanation for why these certificates could be used for human trafficking.

This consciousness is also taking place in Myanmar's civil society. In a 2013 report, for example, KWAT detailed 24 cases of human trafficking in Myanmar, of which 22 belonged to women and two were male. Among 22 women trafficked, 17 of them were sold to Chinese men as brides (KWAT 2013). It is an indisputable fact that, in most trafficking cases, the majority of women were sale as brides to China, which make civil organization more pay attention to and promote this kind of events, and called on the Myanmar government and the international community to give help and assistance. This more strengthen the public awareness of "Burmese brides" being illegal.

I interviewed with my Myanmar classmate in my class about how she thought about the phenomenon of "Burmese brides". Her answer did not surprise me. She thought they were pitiful and didn't have freedom. They were victims of human trafficking, usually were forced to marry Chinese men. She was grieved and angry at their sufferings. But when I explained to her that there were a lot of voluntary marriages on the border between China and Myanmar, she was very surprised and suspicious. She said, many news and messages about "Burmese brides" in Myanmar

were about human trafficking or forced marriage, and she had never heard of voluntary marriage.

### **3.5 Discussion of applicability of legal framework**

About the view whether the standards from China, Myanmar and international community for the illegality of these transnational marriages are appropriate. The point of this article is very clear that the standards are inappropriate.

There is a very serious problem with human trafficking in China – the lack of systematic national data (Kamler 2015, 7). Without specific data, we can't make a directly analysis about the conditions of trafficked Burmese brides and voluntary Burmese brides. But we can also make a rough comparison with the existing data. According to the statistics of Chinese scholars in Dehong state of Yunnan, until April 2010, there were 13,422 Burmese getting married with local Chinese. Among them, there were 12,372 women, occupied 92.18% of the total number (Zhao 2013, 150). As I mentioned before, during the period of 2006 to 2016, 3489 victims have been rescued by polices. Then we assume that the all the victims during this decade as the brides sold to Chinese men. So, the number 3489 represents the number of forced marriages, but this is far lower than the number of women voluntarily with Chinese men in Dehong state in 2010, especially, the data from Dehong state only represent one state, not including other states of Yunnan. Until last year, a stronger support from the evaluation report of Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH) showed that less than 40% of marriages in the China-Myanmar border areas were between Myanmar women and Chinese men in forced marriage *(please see the chapter 4 for more details about the report)*. Therefore, this part of the voluntary marriage of “Burmese brides” is a very larger group.

In addition, another condition that the current standard is not appropriate is that the voluntary transnational marriages are considered illegal, due to the government and public can't distinguish the "price" of custom of betrothal gifts and the "price" of commercial marriages (the price of buying a wife). A report from Myanmar Time points out: first, Chinese men think the Burmese bride is willing, if he could pay the right price (up to US\$8000) to arrange the marriage. According to UNIAP's 2010 report, Myanmar's parents can even accept the "price" lower than US\$1,000 to get a better life for their children by marriage. Ohnmar Ei Ei Chaw, the national program coordinator for UNIAP in the Mekong region, said, "It is a local custom and some think cross-border marriage is normal." (IRIN 2013). Thus, we can see, relevant staff know some information about voluntary marriage, but from his words, he is skeptical about "'price" is a kind of customs" and "transnational marriage is normal". In fact, betrothal gifts money or price is indeed a custom, especially in China. It is the money that bridegroom give to bride. This money is fundamentally different from the "price" of mercenary marriage. The problem, however, is that it is unclear whether the "price" is a custom or not. The report also notes that Myanmar government and Chinese government now believe that kind of arranged marriage is part of human trafficking. And they also signed a comprehensive trafficking memorandum of understanding in 2009 (IRIN 2013). There is no doubt that in the absence of any judgment, it would be very unreasonable to regard transnational marriage that maybe base on custom as illegal.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed how national legal processes and frameworks shape and influence increasing numbers of transnational marriages of Myanmar women to Chinese men producing them as illegal undocumented marriages on the Yunnan-Myanmar border area. Statistics show the increase of transnational marriages between China and Myanmar from the governments of Yunnan province, most of which are

undocumented, as well as being “common law” or “de facto” marriages (*shishi hunyin*) that lack legal status since they cannot produce a marriage certificate.

After analyzing relevant marriage laws, regulations and cases from Myanmar, China and available third countries, some of the difficulties stem from the Myanmar side since: (1) The vast majority of Myanmar women are unable to provide valid identification (such as ID card, passports, or border passes) and single identification from the relevant government or authorities in Myanmar due to the complex ethnic issues (ethnic conflicts, racial discrimination), inconsistent legal standards, corruption of some officials, poverty and other issues; (2) some Myanmar women lack legal awareness. Due to the large number of ethnic groups in Myanmar, different ethnic groups and different religions practice their own marriage customs, traditions and regulations. Some women believe that as long as traditional rituals are held, their marriage is recognized in their community and there is no need to apply for a marriage certificate; (3) some of them lack of financial support. Generally, Myanmar women often need much time and money to obtain relevant documents in Myanmar. For those who want to legally register their marriage in a third country, they still face higher travel costs.

On the China side, the marriages of “Burmese brides” are considered “illegal” mainly due to the government's coordination on national sovereignty, population security, population quality and human trafficking, as well as China-Myanmar relations and other issues. The Chinese government's request for legal marriage certificates is not very high. Even in order to help these Myanmar women legally register marriages, in 2012, the process and document requirements for border people registering marriages were simplified. For example, in terms of document requirements, Myanmar women only need to submit identification documents and single certificate from official and authoritative departments in Myanmar, and these two documents are exactly difficult for Myanmar women to provide. In the

international community side, the marriages of "Burmese brides" are considered "illegal" because their work is more concerned with human rights issues, such as human trafficking, women's assistance, etc., while neglecting within most these undocumented marriages, both parties to the marriage are voluntary.

Finally, this chapter has argued that the legal processes in China, Myanmar and international community for the illegality of these transnational marriages are inappropriate. Since they simply treat all undocumented marriages without holding legal marriage certificates as "illegal", this makes Myanmar women and their Chinese families face legal vulnerabilities. Excessive attention to human trafficking, forced marriage, etc. often overlooks the fact that among most of these undocumented marriages, Myanmar women are voluntarily married. This also ignores the agency of Myanmar women in these marriages. Thus, starting from the next chapter, this thesis will focus on the agency of Myanmar women from an individual perspective. Through various authoritative reports and case studies, it reveals that Myanmar women can choose how, who, when to marry according to their own motivations, and exercise their agency into different marriage practices (not only forced marriage, but also voluntary marriage, commercial marriage, etc.).

## **Chapter 4 The Lived Practices of Myanmar Women Marrying Chinese Men in Yunnan: towards a framework for understanding transnational marriage**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Sociology has debated the dynamics of structure and agency in shaping human behavior for several decades. Chapters 2 and 3 of this these have stressed a structural perspective, examining some of the macro factors that have shaped the growth of northern Myanmar women marrying men in southwestern Yunnan since about the year 2000. The growth numbers of this "Burmese brides" phenomenon was tied to culture, economy, politics, and law. Starting from this chapter, the thesis will focus more on Myanmar women's choices and decision - their "agency" - considering micro or individual perspectives tied to their diverse backgrounds to understand how and why they choose a transnational marriage with Chinese men, and to help explain the expansion of the number of 21<sup>st</sup> century "Burmese brides" in this border zone.

"Agency" refers to the ability of individuals or groups to make effective choices and to translate those choices into desired outcomes. It can be used to interpret how female and male use their talents and economic or social opportunities to achieve desired results (The World Bank 2011, 150). This makes it useful to distinguish and classify their motives or roles are in shaping their marriage, since we can pay attention to whether female marriage migrants keep or how they exercise agency or decision-making powers. In earlier studies of Asian transnational marriages, agency often used to challenge the stereotype that the "mail-order brides" were merely victims and vulnerable to marriages beyond their control (Constable 2005, 2) or the opportunist who married just for better living conditions (Kim 2013, 17). By looking in more detail at the specific life-stories ways of specific Myanmar women who marry men in Yunnan, it is easier to see how women's choice and decisions figure into cross-border marriage-making. By using the concept of "agency" in transnational marriage



we can see a theoretical basis for understanding the diversity of ways that “Burmese brides” practice transnational marriages and to distinguish several interconnected types of motivation that they use to shape their marriages.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, there are many undocumented marriages of “Burmese brides” grew in the frontier areas of Yunnan. Thus marriage often occurs following customs and traditions independent of legal definitions of marriages. This means that Myanmar women still could use legal or illegal ways to exercise their agency in the process to archive marriages. This chapter uses mass media reports about “Burmese brides” from China, Myanmar, the West countries or NGOs to show diverse ways that Myanmar women participate in their transnational marriages and how they exercise agency in these marriages.

Earlier China-Myanmar transnational marriage was often dominated by intra-ethnic marriage as a kind of arranged marriage promoted by ethnic kinship and recent border division. But a new marriage pattern has emerged that was less marked by intra-ethnic marriage to someone near where one lived. This new pattern of marriage involves more intermediaries to find marriage partners in different ethnic groups and over longer distances. This change means the way of China-Myanmar transnational marriage practice is no longer confined only to autonomous ethnic marriage. In this new situation, new types of “mediated marriage” arose. Melody Chia-Wen Lu and Wen-Shan Yang believe that mediated marriages are key to intra-Asian transnational marriages now. They argue that most marriages are now done through diverse intermediaries or social networks. In concluding these marriages, couples may or may not find and intend to marry in advance, or may only have a short courtship (2010, 15). China-Myanmar transnational marriages have begun to conform to this model of mediated marriages, too, and have also gradually acquired more commercial features (Chen 2018, 125). Such marriages have received wide media and public attention, and led to general government and NGO focus on forced, arranged and commercial

marriages which are increasing shaped by intermediaries beyond the marrying couple or their families. It is worth noting that in the border areas, since ethnic kinship is strong and geographic proximity is important, transnational marriage between Yunnan and Myanmar still occurs mainly among the same transnational ethnic groups. Mediated marriages are visible, but less common, but some commercial features have begun to appear. This can also be seen from my field work: 15 of the 20 Myanmar women interviewed belong to the same transnational ethnic group as their Chinese husbands; Outside of the border areas, due to the weakening of ethnic kinship and geopolitical proximity, there will be more mediated marriages with commercial features.

This chapter argues that the diversification of transnational marriage practices in recent years has helped to expand the numbers of so-called "Burmese brides" in Yunnan. In order to better understand how Myanmar women choose and achieve their transnational marriage with their Chinese husbands in these diverse marriage practices, this chapter combines the sociological concept of "agency" or decision-making powers to show how these women actively or passively participate in their individual marital experiences. Depending on the degree of Myanmar women's exercise of agency, their marriage practices may be divided into three distinct but overlapping categories - forced, commercial and voluntary marriage.

#### **4.2 Examining forced marriage processes**

The UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol defines "forced marriage" as seen in Figure 12. It reveals how a woman is considered to be in a forced marriage under these conditions: she has no right to refuse when her guardians, family members or any other person or group receive money or material remuneration to make her marry; or her husband and husband's family and clan transfer her to another person for profits; or she is inherited by others after her husband's death (UNODC, 2009). Forced marriages of Myanmar women to Chinese men can be divided into two types: forced marriage in human trafficking and forced marriage without human trafficking.

Figure 12 The Definition of Forced Marriage from the “UNODC Model Law against Trafficking in Persons”

The “UNODC Model Law against Trafficking in Persons” offers the following definition of *forced or servile marriage*:

*Forced or servile marriage* shall mean any institution or practice in which:

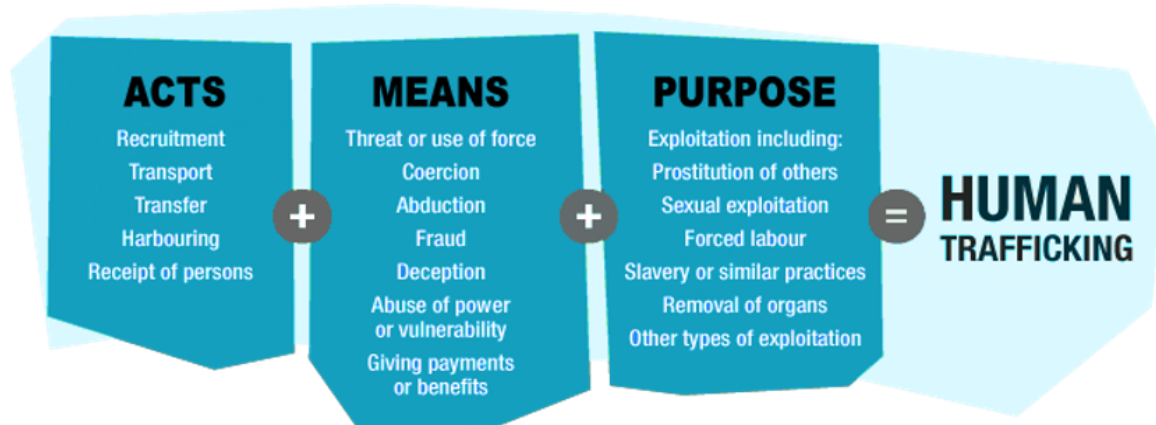
- (i) A woman [person] or child without the right to refuse is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her [his] parents, guardian, family or any other person or group; or
- (ii) The husband of a woman, his family or his clan has the right to transfer her to another person for value received or otherwise; or
- (iii) A woman on the death of her husband is liable to be inherited by another person.

The definition refers solely to the practice of forced or servile marriages in relation to women. Legislators may consider updating this definition to include practices in which both women/girls and men/boys can be the subject of forced or servile marriages. This may cover trafficking for marriage and certain forms of “mail order bride” practices.

Source from: *Analysis of key concepts of the Trafficking in Persons Protocol*, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/organized\\_crime/2010\\_CTOC\\_COP\\_WG4/WG4\\_2010\\_2\\_E.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/organized_crime/2010_CTOC_COP_WG4/WG4_2010_2_E.pdf)

### i. Forced marriage in human trafficking

Figure 13 The Definition of Human Trafficking from the Palermo Protocol



Source from: <http://catilondon.ca/what-is-human-trafficking/>

In line with the above protocols, trafficking in persons mainly includes three elements: “Actions”, “Means” and “Purpose”, seen in Figure 13.

How to identify an act of human trafficking? Generally speaking, it meets the five steps of "Actions" and achieves at least one or more "Purpose" in at least one or more ways of "Means". The process of trafficking Myanmar women into China as brides follows five stages of "Actions": recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons. Usually used "Means" includes fraud, deception, threat, coercion, giving payments or benefits. And main "Purpose" prefers to forced sex and forced child bearing. Looking at some media cases can help to show how these processes of trafficking for marriage work.

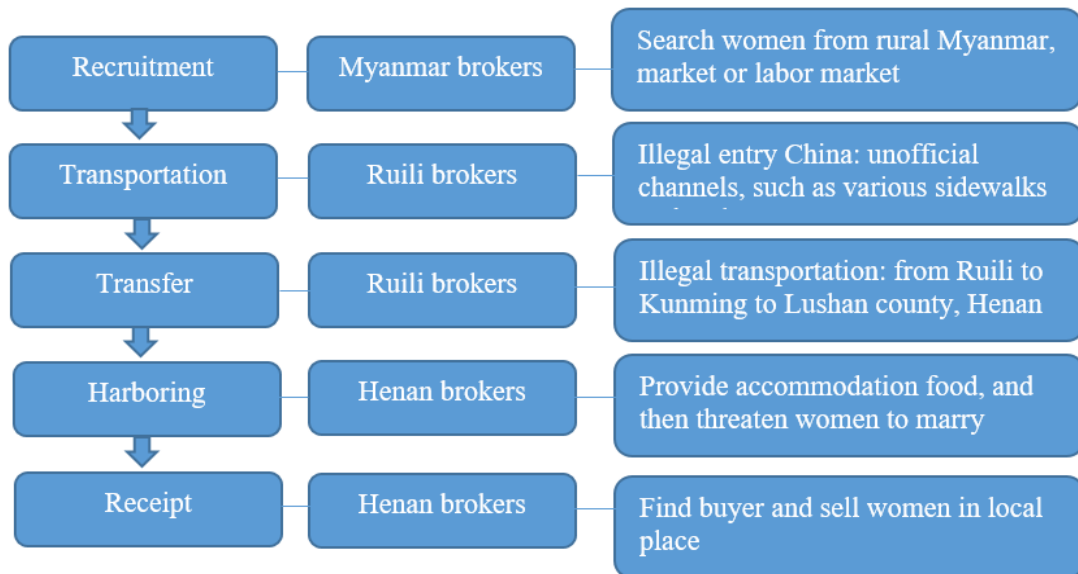
### *Case 1*

*News Probe*, the most influential and representative CCTV TV News report described a case of Myanmar women trafficking in 2015, revealing the complete trafficking chain (CCTV 2015) shown in Figure 14.

In the "recruitment" stage, Myanmar brokers, Ni Wang and others lured Myanmar women from rural Myanmar areas, markets or labor markets with promises of "finding good jobs in China with high wages" or "finding decent Chinese men to marry". In the "transportation" stage, Ni Wang and others delivered Myanmar women to Ruili's Chinese brokers, Yang and Sha, through unofficial channels, on sidewalks and pathways. In the "transfer" phase, Yang and Sha found drivers to move Myanmar women from Ruili to Kunming where, usually as a transit station, they moved from Kunming to Lushan County in Henan Province. After arriving there, the "harboring" stage had local brokers Kong and Li provide Myanmar women with accommodation and food. They then told Myanmar women that marrying is the only way to survive in China since it is "hard to find a job" and "hard to earn money". They also encouraged or threatened those women, saying that "marrying Chinese will lead a good life" and "if you don't marry, you can't go anywhere". Many such Myanmar women surrendered since they didn't know anyone and had no money to return home in an unfamiliar environment. The coercive nature for these women focused on getting them to marry

Chinese men leaves them with no choice over whom to marry. The final “receipt” stage had Kong and Li targeted older, physically or mentally disabled or poor Chinese men and sell Myanmar women to them for 30,000-50,000 RMB [440-735 USD].

*Figure 14 A complete look at the trafficking chain based on a CCTV report*



This trafficking process shows the vulnerability and dilemmas of agency for Myanmar women: they lack the ability to move freely, to control resources what can help themselves escaping from captivity and to decide when and who to marry.

As mediums, the brokers are key to ensuring the connections and flow in the whole chain. Some Myanmar women waver between the role of the victim and the broker. In the above case, a Myanmar woman named A Lu, who was trafficked, joined in the trafficking system and targeted girls from her hometown when she knew the high price her husband spent on her.

### **Case 2**

The Australian media outlet, *Dailylife*, published an article entitled "This woman was sold for \$23" at its website <http://www.dailylife.com.au>.(2013). This article tells about a Burmese woman named Khin who decided to work in China with her little daughter after two failed marriages in Muse, Myanmar. But she was sold to a Chinese

trafficker by her neighbor for 23.5 Australian dollars [around 16.16 US dollars]. She was imprisoned in a house on the China border, and her caretakers sent different men to see her every day night. Later, she was then taken to Shandong Province, China, where she was forced to separate from her daughter (she never saw her daughter again). Finally, she married a Shandong male Jiang Zhigang after this man paid 350 Australian dollars [around 240.67 US dollars] to the broker. At the beginning, she was angry with this Chinese man, but with time went by, Jiang Zhigang was proved to be good-natured, kind and ever accommodating to her needs. However, the only thing that Khin wanted to do always is to go home. After six years of marriage, Khin fled back to Myanmar with her one-year-old son Lone Htaw who is kid of Khin and Jiang Zhigang.

*Figure 15 The Process of the Myanmar Woman Khin Being Trafficked*



The process seen in Figure 15 shows how a Myanmar woman was in a forced marriage situation with human trafficking. In this case, Khin was trafficked to Shandong on the grounds of working in China and became the wife of a Chinese man called Jiang Zhigang. During the period, she was under house arrest and lost her freedom. Even if she admitted that her husband was very nice to her after marriage,

but her greatest wish was still to go home. In this case, media *Dailylife* attributes Khin's misfortune to the population gender imbalance caused by China's one-child policy. And the Chinese men, like Jiang Zhigang who only a factory worker, were described as typical buyers who fails to meet the basic requirements of China's marriage market —Men at least keep an apartment, car and well-paid work before getting marriage.

Overall, forced marriage that is formed by human trafficking satisfies UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol definition and process of Human Trafficking. Myanmar officially ushered in the first democratically elected government after the military government in 2016. Prior to that, under the military regime, inflation of prices in Myanmar had made life unbearable for Myanmar people. In such a bad political and economic situation, more and more Myanmar women wanted a job to support their families, and the rapid development of China's economy was attractive to them (Jiang, Li, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2009, 9). Although Myanmar is now a democratically elected government, many negative impacts left by the military government will continue. Myanmar women have low social status, poor family background and low educational level, which make them more vulnerable to fraud and transportation (Jiang, Li, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2009, 9). In other words, Myanmar women's desires and hopes to improve their socioeconomic situations raises their risk of their being trafficked. In addition to the above two cases, most Myanmar traffickers target their women and deceive these women by promising opportunities of making money, traveling, and finding a good man to marry in China. Sadly, some of these traffickers are parents, relatives, friends or neighbors of those trafficked women. This is clear from the report in *Human Rights Watch* (2019): Seng Moon, a Kachin woman, and her family were forced to live in camps for displaced persons due to the conflict in North Myanmar in 2011. Her sister-in-law took her to the train and sold her to traffickers on the ground of already having found a cook job for her in Yunnan. Moreover, in the process of being trafficked, Burmese women were threatened or

intimidated, completely imprisoned and lost their freedom. After being sold to a buyer, they may still face the exploitation of forced sexual behavior and forced child bearing. It can be said that their degree of agency expression is very low or nothing.

### ***ii. Forced marriage without human trafficking***

Forced marriage without human trafficking often is an “arranged” marriage. The US nonprofit *Unchained*, is dedicated to helping women and girls. They distinguish arranged marriages from forced marriages by using the concepts of consent and coercion. In arranged marriages, the bride and groom agree to marry, with varying degrees of choice; while in forced marriages, one or both party is coerced into marriage without complete free, informed consent (2017). So when there’s no consent from bride or groom, arranged marriages can be classified as forced marriages. The dominant players in arranged marriage could be parents, relatives, friends or strangers. Some cultural practices and old traditions in Myanmar increase women's vulnerability when facing trafficking and abuse, especially in poor rural communities, common in northern Myanmar. Girls and young women may be regarded as commodities by their parents and sold to men who provide enough “bride price” (Krausz 2018). The Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH) gives a case that the implementation of Myanmar woman's agency is limited by parents' wishes: A 29 year-old Kachin woman who was forced to accept an arranged marriage to a Chinese husband without love due to her parents have accepted the man's money (2018, xiii). Quote her original words as follow:

*“I do not love my husband at all. I married him even though I did not want to because we (family) already took his money, so I did not have choice. I had listened to my parents.”*

This type of forced marriage is dominated by the economy problems. Poverty and financial insecurity make Myanmar families choose to arrange marriage as a coping strategy (KWAT and JHSPH 2018, 62). Although sometimes, Myanmar parents do not want to arrange a marriage that their daughter does not want, this marriage may not



only provide a better future for her daughter, but also temporarily solve the family's economic difficulties, which looks like a win-win choice. A case from the report of KWAT and JHSPH offered proof about this: a mother who arranged marriage for her daughter with a Chinese man without her daughter's consent. The mother's original words are quoted as follows:

*“Although it broke my heart to let her marry the old man...it was better for her. Because I could not provide her a better life or even that she would survive living here at home (Myanmar).”* (KWAT and JHSPH 2018, 62)

#### **4.3 Examining the rise of commercial marriage**

The commodification of transnational marriage is a process in which its related activities are transformed to increase the profits of various intermediaries (Wang and Chang 2002, 95), so that “profit” and “intermediary” are important features. Intermediaries generally include personal ties (brokers) or commercial institutions (agencies). China's State Council prohibits transnational marriage referral agencies so the intermediary company or institution works as grey or black markets, often based on personal ties. In border areas, the commerciality of transnational marriages isn't hard to gauge due to the proximity of geography or ethnic kinship (Chen 2018, 127), but it still exists. Generally, the man gives the intermediary some remuneration after being introduced to a woman (Chen 2018, 126). For transnational marriages beyond the border areas or out of Yunnan, the commercial features are more prominent. *Ethical Review*, a famous CCTV TV programme, reported this case (2016): 20 years ago, a woman named Na Ge married into Xinghua County in Jiangsu Province back to Yunnan visiting her relatives, she told the local girls about her marriage life and the beauty of her husband's hometown, which aroused the yearning of the girls. Then the girls entrusted Na Ge to introduce them a husband, including Ya Ga and La Ge, who worked from Myanmar to Yunnan. With the help of Na Ge, they were taken to Jiangsu Province and meet their Chinese husbands and families. After both parties were satisfied and agreed, they married. And Na Ge got rewards from their betrothal gifts

money or price (*caili*)<sup>2</sup>. By 2007, Na Ge has successfully introduced Chinese husbands to seven Myanmar women. This case illustrates one difference between commercial and forced marriage is that women are freely to decide where to go and who to marry. The role of intermediaries is to provide negotiating channels for men and women, once the negotiation reached, and benefit from it. However, commercial marriage may also be on the edge of the law. In above case, Na Ge was sentenced to two-year imprisonment for illegally transferring Ya Ga and La Ge from Yunnan to Jiangsu with using the documents of her daughter and friends. Interestingly, Ya Ga and La Ge expressed puzzlement, because in their eyes, Na Ge was kind to help them find right husband. It just reflects that despite the restriction of legal documents, Myanmar women can still express their agency through intermediaries to achieve their marriages.

#### 4.4 Examining voluntary marriage

There are various ways to conclude voluntary marriages. What is important is that women have freedom in making choices to marry. Voluntary marriage is the natural result of same ethnic marriage, the result of free love, the commercial marriage without pursuing profit, and the arranged marriage with the consent of women. In 2015, a report from the Yunnan government revealed that transnational marriages in Yunnan mainly occurred in eight border cities, accounting for 98.02%. Among them, Baoshan, Dehong and Lincang, which are connected with Myanmar, account for the highest proportion (Chen 2018, 122). Same transnational ethnic marriages are prevailing, but there're also a large number of cross-ethnic marriages coexisting (Chen 2018, 123). Consequently, geography and ethnicity still are important factors in shaping Yunnan-Myanmar transnational marriage. In those marriages, women get marry closer home and their autonomy and agency tend to be higher (Su 2013, 39).

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<sup>2</sup> Betrothal gifts money or price (*caili*) is a kind of custom, especially in China. It is usually money that bridegroom or his family gives to bride or her family.

Rwiyen, a social worker in Child benefit program run by China government and UNICEF in Eluo Dai village of Ruili, said in the village, more than 90% of mothers come from Myanmar and they had no language barriers to communicate with local people, because they are also Dai people. One of those mother, Hamben, who's from Shan State, claimed that her parents arranged the marriage for her in order to protect her from civil conflict, so she accepted it (CGTN 2017). In this case, transnational same-ethnic marriage is higher and is an automatic choice for Myanmar women based on ethnic kinship culture; in addition, although it's an arranged marriage, Hamben agreed to marry, in spite of her consent may be driven by the war. Furthermore, there're numerous ways for Myanmar women to have free love with Chinese men, such as working, studying, social activities, visiting relatives and so on. For non-profit-oriented intermediary marriage types, Myanmar women and Chinese men generally know each other through acquaintances (Zhao and Yang, 2016). According to Chinese scholars' surveys, in China-Myanmar transnational marriage, the percentages of men and women knowing each other through work and introducing by relatives and friends are high, which means it has high voluntariness (Yue 2014, 15; Chen 2018, 125-127).

Moreover, the KWAT and JHSPH study provides evidence for the common of voluntary marriages by assessing the number of Myanmar women into forced marriage and child bearing with Chinese men (KWAT and JHSPH, 2018). They interviewed 394 Myanmar women in their 40 research sides in Northern Shan state (n=5), Kachin state (n=15) of Myanmar and Figure 1 Table 1 Dehong state (n=20) of Yunnan and showed that there were 157 women in forced marriage (39.8%) and 237 women in autonomous marriage<sup>3</sup> (60.2%). They estimated the prevalence of forced marriage in their research areas based on household surveys, current population statistics from China, Myanmar, etc. and acquired that there were roughly 18200 women got married with Chinese men in 2013-2017. Among them, around 7500

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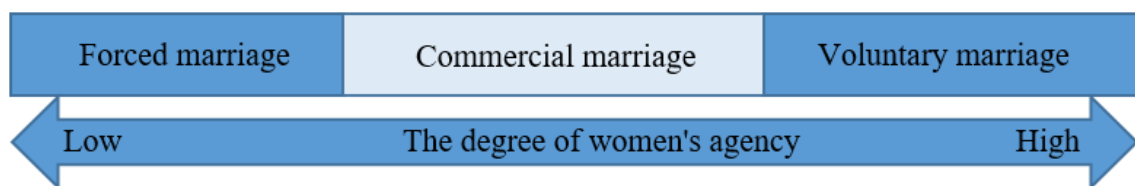
<sup>3</sup> The term "autonomous marriage" in the report by KWAT and JHSPH refers to non-forced marriages. It is a bit broader than voluntary marriage, since it considers both the agency of Myanmar women and others who help women making decisions without coercion.

women were in forced marriage and 10700 weren't in forced marriage. When looking to more lager areas (Northern Shan and Kachin state and Yunnan province), it showed that although the number of forced marriages exceeds thousands, the number of voluntary marriages still accounts for the vast majority, which shouldn't be ignored.

#### 4.5 Discussion of the Agency Tied to Transnational Marriage Practices

The above analyses of mass media reports about "Burmese brides" from China, Myanmar, the Western countries or NGOs stress forced marriages as those with the lowest degree of agency for Myanmar women. They are not based on freely chosen marriage. But voluntary marriages are the majority of marriages in this frontier zone, and for these marriages Myanmar women show high degrees of agency, making key decisions about who, where, when, or how to marry. Commercial marriages are a special type of marriage practice requiring intermediaries and often involving commercial transactions. Within this class of marriage, Myanmar women's agency normally falls between forced and voluntary marriage. Marriages violating the free will of Myanmar women are known as "forced marriage" and those marked by the free will of Myanmar women and intermediaries (usually acquaintances, like relatives, friends, etc.) and are not for profit are "voluntary marriages", as shown in Figure 16.

Figure 16 The Classification of Marriage Practices Based on the Degree of Women's agency



The second chapter has already described the changing China-Myanmar transnational marriage pattern: with the stronger formation of the China-Myanmar border line, the early intra-ethnic marriages over weakly-enforced borders became a transnational marriage taking place over strongly enforced borderlines. In recent years, these transnational marriages have gradually expanded to include more marriages

among different ethnic groups. Most of the marriages have occurred between Myanmar women and Chinese men. In addition, the marriages have begun to expand outward, spreading from border areas to further inland in China. That is to say, in recent years, transnational marriage between China and Myanmar has also begun to be less restricted by ethnic kinship and geographical location. When this pattern changed, the way people practice their transnational marriage may also change. Like mediated marriage, this emerging practice to promote transnational marriage for people of the same or of different ethnic groups over longer distances. At present, as mentioned in chapter 2, forced, arranged and commercial marriages that most mainstream media and NGOs are more concerned about are mostly the types of mediated marriage that ignore the will of women involved in them.

Under this changing pattern of China-Myanmar transnational marriage, people practice these transnational marriages has also become more diversified. At the same time, this diversification of marriage types also contributes to an increase of the number of Myanmar women married to Chinese men. In addition, the diversity of practices in these transnational marriages is aimed at demonstrating that there are many ways in which people practice marriage. Not most of them exist in the form of forced or commercial marriages, which are mainly concerned and reported by mainstream media and NGOs; by comparison, there are many autonomous marriages that are based on the free will of Myanmar women or their families.

Women's agency towards to transnational marriage is an important angle to understand different marriage practices. With the limitations of external conditions, they cannot, in part or in whole, allow themselves to participate in the process of completing a marriage based on their will, which makes them practice differently. Therefore, according to the extent of Myanmar women's agency exercise in their transnational marriage, their practices of marriage are divided into forced marriage with low or none agency, commercial marriage with partial agency and voluntary marriage with more or full agency. Then, this chapter analyzes the reports about

“Burmese brides” issues by authoritative media or NGOs, and elaborates on each type of practices, and understand the role of agency or how Myanmar women use agency in the whole process of marriage achievement: from decision-making of marriage, to implementation of marriage, to completion of marriage, which aiming to understand whether Myanmar women have autonomy and voluntariness or not in their marriage with Chinese men.

Through detailed analyses of the three types of marriage: forced marriage, commercial marriage and voluntary marriage, we can see that Myanmar women's agency expression in forced marriage is low or none. Their marriage is basically decided by others and they have no control over it. In detail, forced marriage can be divided into two categories: forced marriage in human trafficking and forced marriage without human trafficking. The former meets the three basic elements of the United Nations' definition of human trafficking: "Actions", "Means" and "Purpose": brokers transfer Myanmar women as brides from Myanmar to Chinese buyers with the main purpose of coercive sex and child bearing, through intimidation, coercion and other means. For the latter, it does not constitute human trafficking, but it is often associated with arranging marriage. In this type of arranged marriage, for various reasons, the marriage decision maker promotes the marriage without the consent of Myanmar woman. In commercial marriage, intermediary and profit are two key factors. For some Myanmar women who are interested in marrying Chinese men, they need the help through mediation because of the lack of means and resources to achieve marriage. Correspondingly, the intermediary will charge a certain fee after helping to realize the marriage. It is worth noting that in commercial marriages, although some external factors may interfere or restrict the expectations or behaviors of some Myanmar women, they still have the autonomy of their marriage, and they can decide who, how and when to marry. In exceptional circumstances, once Myanmar women's free will is violated, such commercial marriages will be regarded as forced marriages; if their will isn't violated and intermediaries (such as friends and relatives) are not for profit, such commercial marriages will be regarded as voluntary marriages. Finally, in

voluntary marriages, as the name implies, Myanmar women's marriages are entirely based on their free will, and their degree of agency exercise is very high. Most of these marriages occur among transnational ethnic groups on the China-Myanmar border since these ethnic groups share similar history, customs, living habits, language and so on. But at the same times, there're also a large number of cross-ethnic marriages coexisting, those marriages are concluded by free love between Myanmar women and Chinese men, they may know each other in various ways such as working, studying, social activities, visiting relatives and so on.

In short, the analysis of the three types of marriage practices shows that forced marriage is just one of three types, and that the actual types are more diverse and complex. Mainstream media and NGOs pay too much attention to forced and commercial marriage, and often ignore other more common types of marriage, especially voluntary marriage. The recent study by KWAT and JHSPH shows that at least 60% of Myanmar women who have married Chinese men in southwestern Yunnan entered into autonomous marriages on the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier. This shows that many women from Myanmar who marry Chinese men in Yunnan autonomously marry Chinese husbands who are near - both in terms of ethnicity and in term of geography - rather than being trafficked or forced to marry men from who live away and are from different ethnic groups. This chapter provides a fuller framework of these different types of marriages and shows the role of their choice or "agency" in forming their diverse marriage practices in this frontier region. Marriages formed here out of choice are more common than those of either forced marriage or commercial marriage.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter shows that with the changing pattern of China-Myanmar transnational marriage, Myanmar women practice marriages with Chinese men in Yunnan in more diverse ways than before the year 2000 or so. From this time there has been an increase in the number of "Burmese brides" in southwestern Yunnan. But

in this border area, the longstanding ethnic connections and geographic proximity has meant that transnational marriage between men in southwestern Yunnan and women from northern Myanmar still occurs mainly among those in the same transnational ethnic groups, with less use of mediated marriage, even though some commercialization of marriages has begun to occur. In non-border areas, due to the weakening of ethnic kinship ties and less geopolitical proximity, there are more mediated marriages which are commercialized.

Moreover, based on the analyses on the cases of media reports about "Burmese brides" issues from China, Myanmar, Western countries and NGOs, we see different ways that Myanmar women could exercise their agency to varying degrees in diverse practices like voluntary, commercial and forced marriage, which could help them improve their marriage opportunities. At the same time, the diversity of marriage practices shows that forced marriage - while significant and terrible - is only one type of marriage for these women constituting less than 40% of these marriages. It is worth considering the reasons that the majority of Myanmar women choose to marry men in Yunnan, which will be the focus of the next chapter.



## **Chapter 5 Contextual Analysis of Myanmar Women Marrying Chinese Men in Yunnan**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter 2 and 3 examined some structural factors faced by a large number of Myanmar women who migrate to China through transnational marriage. This included analyzing cross-border ethnic disparities between China and Myanmar, gender imbalance and the marriage squeeze in China, the civil war and persecution of AIDS and drugs in northern Myanmar as macro-factors to increase the number of Myanmar women to marry Chinese men, even under difficult legal constraints. However, it is not enough to focus solely on structural factors. Individual factors tied to choice also affect the number and type of transnational marriage between Myanmar women and Chinese men. Chapter 4 has shown that Myanmar women take part in diverse types of marriage practices by doing individual case studies which indicate the Myanmar women exercising varying degrees of choice and will in their decision-making – called “agency” in sociology. At same time, a major recent report from KWAT and JHSPH has estimated with much evidence that most (60.2%) of the transnational marriages of northern Myanmar women to men in southwestern Yunnan are voluntary marriages (or autonomous marriage) while non-voluntary marriages – including those done by force or through trafficking – constitute (39.8%) of those in this border area. Therefore, it is important to gain a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the whole process of voluntary marriage, including before and after marriage, of Myanmar women and their motivation for choosing to marry men in Yunnan based on their exercise of agency. This chapter will present several cases from fieldwork done in Yunnan, and analyze why and how Myanmar women marry Chinese men in rural or urban areas of this border zone.

The fieldwork was conducted in Ruili and Tengchong districts, located in Dehong prefecture and Baoshan city, respectively. Since 2015 these two districts have

been the two border states with the largest number of transnational marriages in Yunnan (Chen 2017, 122). In my fieldwork, I met and interviewed 20 Myanmar women married to Chinese men. Among them, 10 are from Ruili (6 living in urban areas, 4 living in rural areas), and another 10 are from Tengchong (6 living in urban areas, 4 living in rural areas). Basic information for these 20 informants is given in Figure 17. All of them claimed that they married voluntarily.

*Figure 17 Basic Information of Field Interview*

Field Work Period	Fieldwork Place	Reference Number of Interviewee	Home(China) in Urban/Rural	Home in Myanmar	Ethnic Group	Husband's Ethnic group
6/7/2018-20/7/2018	Ruili	RU1	Urban area	Mogok, Mandalay (near to Shan State border)	Shan/Kokang	Han
	Ruili	RU2	Urban area	Manhlyoe, Shan State	Shan/Shan	Dai
	Ruili	RR1	Rural area	Namhkam, Shan State	Shan/Shan	Dai
	Ruili	RU3	Urban area	Lashio, Shan State	Shan/Kokang	Han
		RU4	Urban area	Lashio, Shan State	Shan/Kokang	Han
	Ruili	RU5	Urban area	Pang Hseng, Shan State	Shan/Shan	Dai
		RU6	Urban area	Pang Hseng, Shan State	Shan/Shan	Han
	Ruili	RR2	Rural area	Lashio, Shan State	Shan/Kokang	Han
		RR3	Rural area	Taunggyi, Shan State	Shan/Kokang	Han
		RR4	Rural area	Tangyan, Shan State	Shan/Kokang	Han
26/8/2018-6/9/2018	Tengchong	TU1	Urban area	Namhkan, Shan State	Shan/Kokang	Han
		TU2	Urban area	Kutkai, Shan State	Shan/Kokang	Han
		TU3	Urban area	Myitkyina, Kachin State	Kachin/Kachin	Jingpo
	Tengchong	TR1	Rural area	Lashio, Shan State	Kachin/Kachin	Han
	Tengchong	TU4	Urban area	Myitkyina, Kachin State	Kachin/Kachin	Han
		TU5	Urban area	Namhkan, Shan State	Shan/Lisu	Han
10/2/2019-15/2/2019		TU6	Urban area	Namhkan, Shan State	Shan/Lisu	Han
	Tengchong	TR2	Rural area	Kunlong, Shan State	Shan/Hmong	Miao
	Tengchong	TR3	Rural area	Kunlong, Shan State	Shan/Hmong	Miao
	Tengchong	TR4	Rural area	Kunlong, Shan State	Shan/Hmong	Miao

*Note: To protect the privacy of respondents, "Reference Numbers" are used here to indicate the names of the respondents. Reference Number = Capital initials of fieldwork places + Urban/Rural + Number e.g. "RU1"=Ruili+Urban+No.1; "TR1"=Tengchong+Rural+No.1*

All 20 of my informants come from northern Myanmar, 17 of them from Shan State and 3 from Kachin State. Most of them are ethnic minorities in Myanmar, and the rest are not one of the 135 ethnic groups officially recognized by the Myanmar government. Details as follow: 8 are from the Kokang ethnic group, 4 are from the Shan ethnic group, 3 are from the Kachin ethnic group, 2 are from the Lisu ethnic group, 3 are from the Hmong ethnic group (not recognized by the Myanmar government). When correlated with the ethnic groups of their husbands in China, and

matched with the list of cross-border ethnic groups given in Chapter 2, it can be seen that most of the marriages of my informants occurred with husbands from the same ethnic group. Since Kokang-Han, Shan-Dai, Kachin-Jingpo, Hmong-Miao are seen as being same ethnic group, 15 of these 20 transnational marriages occur within the same ethnic group, while 5 are inter-ethnic marriages. This shows that being from the same ethnic group is still an important factor in shaping transnational marriage choices in this border area.

## 5.2 The reasons of Myanmar women marrying Chinese men in Yunnan

*Figure 18 The Reasons Myanmar Women Say They Marry Chinese Men in Yunnan*

Reference Number of Interviewee	Reasons to marry	Work before coming to China	Work before getting married in China	Work after married in China
RU1	free love	Work in factory	Work in factory	Housewife
RU2	Can't find a husband in hometown because she was divorced once.	Sale Chinese Commodities	Sale Chinese Commodities	Run fruit stalls in the market
RR1	free love	Student	Work in factory	Housewife
RU3	free love	Student	Sale mobile phone accessories	Sale mobile phone accessories
RU4	free love	Student	Sale mobile phone accessories	Sale mobile phone accessories
RU5	free love	Work for restaurant	Work for restaurant	Run own nail shop
RU6	free love	Student	Student	Sale Jade with husband
RR2	free love	Work for clothing store	Jade salesman	Housewife
RR3	free love	work in the factory	Jade salesman	Run a convenience store
RR4	free love	Chinese-Burmese translators	Chinese-Burmese translators	Housewife
TU1	free love	Sale Chinese Commodities	Work for clothing store	Run hardware store with husband
TU2	free love	Student	Working travel company	Housewife
TU3	free love	Chinese-Burmese translator	Chinese-Burmese translator	Chinese-Burmese translator
TR1	Avoiding the native family violence	—	—	Farming, with husband family
TU4	free love	Work in factory	Work in factory	Housewife
TU5	Local Myanmar male drug abusers are more	Farming	Farming	Housewife but does Wechat business
TU6	Life in China is better and easier	Farming	Farming	Housewife but does Wechat business
TR2	Can't find a husband in hometown because she have five children her ex-husband.	Work for a restaurant	—	Farming
TR3	Visit acquaintances and find the life is better in China.	Farming	Farming	Farming
TR4	free love	Farming	Farming	Farming

To understand the Myanmar women's motivations for transnational marriage, we can explore some general ideas about autonomous and voluntary marriages of Myanmar women who marry men in Yunnan. This will suggest some evidence of how Myanmar women fully or partially choose to achieve their marriage preferences. The results of the interviews with the 20 women about why Myanmar women want to marry Chinese are seen in Figure 18.

*i. Free love: meeting by themselves in the work, study, social events etc.*

Figure 18 shows that 14 out of 20 respondents claimed they married out of "free love" and chose their husbands in Yunnan because they liked each other. Most of them had met and gotten to know each other at work or while studying or in normal social activities. See Figure 20 for details on this. Such motives are mainly derived from ordinary daily interaction of people in border areas. In the Yunnan-Myanmar border areas, special geographic, consanguineous and kinship relations, as well as similar linguistic skills shapes the interactions between the border people in various forms in all aspects of daily production and life, and also forms their social networks (Zhao and Yang 2016, 75). These daily interactions include not only the mutual assistance and cooperation in production and work, interactive visit marriage and funeral ceremony, communicate in festival or religious activities, but also trade, work or study among border people under the influence of political, economic and social policies, etc. (Zhao and Yang 2016, 75).

For example, in Ruili, Dai and Jingpo people are the main minorities. Every April, Dai people celebrate Water-sprinkling Festival. Ethnic Shan people of Myanmar is transnational ethnic group with the Dai people, thus they also celebrate, at the same time, the same festival which is called in different names as Thingyan Festival or Myanmar New Year in Myanmar. During the festival, Myanmar border people are allowed to celebrate with Ruili people. In addition, there are many government-sponsored celebrations to promote the relations between two countries, such as the Pauk Phaw Festival (meaning of "Pauk Phaw" translates into "brothers" or "relatives" in

Burmese). These celebrations have provided a stage for the border people of the two countries to meet. I provide several examples below of how this works.

*RU3 from Lashio, Shan State said, "When I came to Ruili for Water-Sprinkling Festival, I met my husband. We all had a good time and exchanged contact information. Then got married... Many people on our side would like to come to Ruili to celebrate this festival."*

*RU4 from Lashio, Shan State said, "At the first day of Pauk Phaw Festival in October last year (2018), my friend RU3 invited me to go to the square to watch the parade and performance, and there I met my husband."*

Some examples are those tied to China and Myanmar bilateral border trade, but free love meetings tied to work and learning is more common. They could meet on the Myanmar side or Yunnan side of the border.

*TU2 from Kutkai, Shan State said, "My husband and I met at Myitkyina, where I worked and he came to my company for a business trip."*

*TU3 from Myitkyina, Kachin State said, "My husband and I met in Myitkyina in 2016, when I worked as a Chinese-Burmese translator in the local outreach department. At that time, my husband was studying in Yangon, Myanmar."*

*TU1 from Namhkan, Shan State said, "My husband and I are free love. I met him while working in Tengchong. Later I thought he was a good man and married him."*

## ***ii. Images of Chinese men as "diligent" and "nice"***

The contemporary "marriage-scape" (Lauser 2008) seen here fits the pattern of brides from less developed countries marrying grooms from more developed countries. It's not just shaped by economic geographies but also by "cartographies of desire" or "sites of desire" (Constable 2005, 7), affected by existing and emerging cultural, social, historical and politico-economic factors (Lauser 2006, 322). In China-

Myanmar transnational marriages, Myanmar women often view Chinese men as "diligent" and "nice" since they work hard to support family, which they contrast to Myanmar men who are seen by Myanmar women as "lazy" and "addicted to drugs", which makes Myanmar women prefer marrying Chinese men. Some cases below show this.

*Case of TU5 from Namhkan, Shan State said: "My husband's family is not better than my native family. Marring into China is because there're too many male drug addicts in my hometown. Therefore, if I marry a Chinese man, the life may be more stable."*

Chapter 2 has also noted the serious drug problems in northern Myanmar, with the number of Myanmar men who are addicted to drugs being very high, produced a view of Myanmar men as "drug addicts". Moreover, in Myanmar culture, some stereotypes of Myanmar men as timid, lazy and willing to gossip or enjoy a delicious meal, a cigarette, tea than to work hard. This often means that Myanmar women need to take on more family responsibilities (Bhatia 2016). With the development of China's economy in recent decades, the media has produced some images of Chinese "diligent" men. In Chinese traditional culture, although women also often have a lower social status than men, men will attend the responsibilities of supporting families. This leads to different image of men of the two countries, and helps to shape the "marriage-scape" that Myanmar women live. As a result, it often makes marrying a Chinese man preferable to a Myanmar man for Myanmar women, since the former are seen to be more "diligent" and "nice".

### ***iii. Escaping violence from native families***

There are many studies showing that poverty is related to domestic violence towards to women and children. Research shows that in the United States, poverty has increased family violence: low income and unemployment are directly related to the high ratio of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Physical Child Abuse (PCA) (Maurer

2015). But there are also studies suggesting that violence can lead to poverty by creating an unstable or dangerous environment that is not conducive to economic development or growth (Crutchfield and Wadsworth 2003, 67). This is just like a vicious circle between poverty and violence. According to the latest statistics of Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), the average poverty rate in Myanmar is about 25.6%, while in northern Myanmar, the poverty rate in Shan is higher, at 33%, and in Kachin it is about 28.6% (LIFT 2018, 3). In addition, some studies have shown that poverty is still a hindrance to Myanmar women's access to formal jobs because they cannot pay for acquiring ID cards or labour cards. Thus, this makes it hard to become official employees (Bradley and Sauvanet 2017, 9), which means Myanmar women may work harder and get rewarded less for doing the same job as men. The Myanmar women's vulnerability of finding a job to earn money makes them face difficulties in maintaining family life by providing income. Young girls in particular are easy to abuse or violence from their parents. If they can't go out to work, just doing housework at home can't make a substantial contribution to improving the family's living conditions. An example shows this.

*TRI from Lashio, Shan State: Unlike other 19 brides, TRI met her husband through an intermediary. They met once and got married. "I won't go back to my Myanmar home anymore. My father always beats me," she said in not fluent Chinese.*

In this case, *TRI* and her original family lived in rural areas in northern Shan State. She was born in 1996. She has one elder brother, one elder sister, two younger sisters and one younger brother. Her mother has passed away, so they lived with their father. Since all her family members could not get Myanmar ID cards, her father only could do part-time jobs to support the family. Since the elder brother and sister have established their own families, *TRI* is responsible for the housework, but housework can't improve the true conditions of the family. The enormous pressure of life made his father become violent, often turning this incompetence towards to life into insults

and whipping on *TRI* and her younger sisters, especially *TRI*. Therefore, when a broker asked if she would marry the Chinese, she agreed without much hesitation.

*TRI* said that she is satisfied with her current life. Her husband and husband's family are good to her, although she has to work with her husband to farm, mainly planting walnuts and grazing, but the income is enough to maintain their lives and still to have a surplus. Now, they have a one-year-old boy. When I interviewed them, they were pleased to share their marital experiences, and *TRI* seems to really enjoy her current life. See Figure 19:

*Figure 19 Myanmar Woman TRI and Her Chinese Family*



*Note: Myanmar woman TRI (right), her Chinese husband (left), her child (middle). In order to protect the privacy of respondents, their faces in the picture were digitally altered.*

#### ***iv. Avoiding Civil War in Northern Myanmar***

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the long-lasting civil wars in northern Myanmar have pushed Myanmar women marrying Chinese men in order to avoid the drawbacks of the wars. Although none of my informants said they got married directly due to avoid war, some replies like that below indirectly suggest that conflict may have had some role in their marriage decision.



*RU1 from Mogok, Mandalay, near the Shan State border, said: "I'm lucky. In the past, there always were fight in Kachin State and Kokang region, many people came to China to take refuge. Some girls feel China may be safer and choose to marry Chinese men, but most of them still go back to their hometown after the war."*

***v. Hard to find a local man***

Some scholars have also put forward a view that one reason for Myanmar women to marry Chinese men is that Myanmar women face the problem of marriage squeeze caused by gender imbalance in population. Myanmar statistics show that the number of women is more than that of men (Yue 2014, 21), which has made it difficult for them to find a local Myanmar man to marry. Following the national census of Myanmar in 2014, the population of Myanmar is about 51,486,253, with 24,824,586 males and 26,661,667 females (Ministry of Immigration and Population of Myanmar/MIPM 2015, 12). This data makes such a view is plausible but it is not enough to fully explain the transnational marriages. It suggests that the China-Myanmar transnational marriages are concentrated in border areas, and that the immigrant women in Yunnan from Myanmar are mainly from Shan and Kachin State (Chen 2018, 122). The census of Myanmar in 2014 reveal that Kachin state has a total population of 1,689,441, with men 878,384 and women 811,05 (MIPM 2015, 12), which means men are more than women; Shan state has a total population of 5,824,432, with men 2,910,710, women 2913,722 (MIPM 2015, 12), which shows a small gap between women and men. Since the large majority of Myanmar women marrying Yunnan men are from Shan state, the gender distribution in population is not the main reason for Myanmar women hard to find a local to marry. In addition, interviews suggest that economic or social reasons matter more, as seen in the following interviews:

*TR2 from Kunlong, Shan State told me: "My ex-Myanmar husband drowned while crossing the river, leaving me five children. Nobody in my village dares to marry me*

*because it's too difficult to raise five children. Then I met my husband who is a good man willing to take care of my children.”*

*RU2 from Manhlyoe, Shan State, stated: “The men in my village said my first child with ex-husband is a burden, which made me very disappointed. Later, my relatives introduced me to my husband. He is very nice to me, and supports my child attending school in Myanmar.”*

In both cases, Myanmar women faced the dilemma of remarriage because they had a marriage and children with their ex-husband in Myanmar. Feeding a child is not easy, let alone feeding more than one child. Without an adequate economic foundation, it is difficult for local Myanmar men to accept such a situation. In addition, it is undeniable that in some villages in Myanmar, there seems to be some prejudice against divorced women, who are regarded as less pure or well than unmarried women.

*A friend of RU2 said, “To be honest, divorced women are hard to find new suitable spouses in our village. The men in the village prefer to marry young unmarried girls.”*

#### ***vi. Seeking better living conditions***

Women account for two-thirds of the poor in Asia, and discrimination in employment and education makes them vulnerable to economic insecurity. This vulnerability is widened by poverty leading to poor health, limited decision-making ability and few opportunities for women to escape poverty (UN women, 2019). Myanmar is rich in ecological resources, and is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, but economically, it is the poorest country in Southeast Asia (World Bank, 2014), which means that Myanmar women are also facing economic difficulties caused by discrimination in employment and education. At the same time, it makes them focus on moving to China, a neighboring country with better living conditions

and more employment opportunities. Among them, marriage migration has become a survival strategy for them to fight poverty and to get a better life.

Figure 18 shows that, after comparing those women's jobs before and after marriage, before marriage, most of them (except students) need to work to earn money. After marriage, most of them become housewives (don't work outside), or farmer (with husband and family's participation, reducing the burden) or operate a small business. At least their work burden has been reduced. Moreover, transnational marriages are matters of both geographical mobility and social and economic movement (Su 2013, 18). Thus it is clear that promoting social and economic status is also a reason they choose to marry Chinese men, as seen in these examples.

*TR3 from Kunlong, Shan State, said, "I visited a Chinese acquaintance and found the life there was better even if it was rural village. I marry my husband since him and his family treated me well and don't need me working every day. At Myanmar home, there are endless works to do, but earn less, such as feeding livestock, planting farms every day."*

*TU6 from Namhkan, Shan State, mentioned: "My hometown is a rural village in Shan state with terrible living condition. Girls in my village said marrying Chinese men will be better than now. Later, a friend of mine, who married with Chinese man, introduced me to my husband in the city."*

### **5.3 Social Networks among Myanmar women marrying Chinese men**

#### ***i. How do they meet their husband?***

Transnational marriage usually consists of two main forms: those that unite people of the same ethnic group and those that join different groups through different connections. Those connections are social networks, including people, organizations, or social entities (nodes) connected by a set of relationships. Common categories include kinship network and business networks (Su 2013, 37). Analyzing how these 20

Myanmar women interviewed met their Chinese husbands could help us understand how these Myanmar women actively use social networks to start considering making a transnational marriage.

*Figure 20 The Ways Myanmar Women Met Their Chinese Husbands*

<b>Interview Form</b>	<b>Reference Number of Interviewee</b>	<b>How to know each other</b>	<b>Using social software</b>
Individual interview	RU1	work in Ruili	Wechat, phone, QQ
Individual interview	RU2	Introduction by relatives	phone
Individual interview	RR1	work in Henan	Wechat, phone, QQ
Group interview (2 people)	RU3	meet in social event	Wechat, phone, QQ
	RU4	meet in social event	Wechat, phone, QQ
Group interview (2 people)	RU5	visit relatives and meet husband.	Wechat, phone
	RU6	meet in social activity	Wechat, phone
Group interview (3 people)	RR2	work in Ruili	Wechat, phone
	RR3	work in Ruili	Wechat, phone
	RR4	work in Ruili	Wechat, phone
Group interview (3 people)	TU1	work in Tengchong	Wechat, phone, QQ
	TU2	work in Myitkyina	Wechat, phone, QQ
	TU3	work and study in Myitkyina	Wechat, phone, QQ
Individual Interview but with her husband	TR1	Introduction by strangers (meet in Ruili)	phone
Group interview (3 people)	TU4	work in Myitkyina	Wechat, phone
	TU5	Arrangement by parents	Wechat, phone
	TU6	Introduction by friends	Wechat, phone
Individual Interview but with her husband	TR2	work in Nansang, Lingcang City	Wechat, phone
Individual Interview (Her husband died last year)	TR3	visit acquaintances and meet husband.	Wechat, phone
Individual Interview but with her husband	TR4	visit acquaintances and meet husband.	Wechat, phone

Transnational marriage usually consists of two main forms: those that unite people of the same ethnic group and those that join different groups through different connections. Those connections are social networks, including people, organizations,

or social entities (nodes) connected by a set of relationships. Common categories include kinship network and business networks (Su 2013, 37). Analyzing how these 20 Myanmar women interviewed met their Chinese husbands could help us understand how these Myanmar women actively use social networks to start considering making a transnational marriage.

Figure 20 reveals how the 20 respondents came to know their Chinese husbands: 1. Meeting through work or study relationship (n=10); 2. Introducing through friends (n=1); 3 Meeting during visiting Chinese relatives (n=3); 4. Meeting during social activities (n=3); 5. Parental arrangements (n=1); 6. Introducing by relative (n=1); 7. By unfamiliar intermediary (n=1).

In the context of developing bilateral border trade, China and Myanmar encourage developing economic interactions, and cultural and sports cooperation in border areas. Border people can cross the border to participate in religious activities, visit relatives and friends, seek medical treatment, engage in commercial trade, and celebrate traditional national festivals. (Song 2017, 481). It provides a platform for reciprocal exchanges between the border people, allowing them to enter into a stronger social network, which makes a big influence in how Myanmar women meet Chinese men.

Thus, it is understandable that the majority of women I interviewed knew their husbands-to-be by working and studying with them, just like the cases of RR2 and RR3. Both of them are from Shan state, and sold jade at Ruili's "China-Myanmar Jade City" (the name of a large-scale jade market in Ruili), since in the border areas of China and Myanmar, the jade business has an important business.

*RR2 said, "My husband is also doing jade business in Ruili, and often comes to talk business with our company. So we got to know each other."*

*RR3 said, "My husband runs a convenience store near our jade city. We (with RR2) will often go to his store to buy retail commodities, and we just naturally become familiar."*

Similarly, the type of meeting during visits to relatives in Yunnan also falls under this kind of social network. Such as case of *RU5*. She is from Pang Hseng. Pang Hseng is a town under the jurisdiction of Muse County, Shan state and connects to Wangding, a town of Ruili, where is the hometown of her Chinese husband

*She told me, "There are many Chinese relatives living in Wangding Town in our family. It's normal that people on our side (Myanmar) visit Chinese relatives. I knew my husband when I went to visit my aunt family."*

The types of introduction or arrangement by friends, relatives and parents belong to kinship network often in the same ethnic groups. Kin and friends would assist Myanmar women to fulfill their needs. For example, when a Myanmar woman marries a Chinese man with better life, she will help other Myanmar girls in her village to marry man in same Chinese village. Finally, the Myanmar women in this Chinese village will form a relationship circle or form a new social network. Just like the case of *TU6* as mentioned in above section 5.2. She married her Chinese husband through a friend's introduction. But it's worth noting that when I asked her if she would also introduce girls from her hometown to Chinese men.

*She replied, "If it weren't the people who have a good relationship with me, I would not take the initiative to introduce them to marry. Now the Myanmar government has a strict control over this kind of thing. Sometimes, if a girl does not get the marriage she expected, she goes back and tells the community that it is me to introduce her marrying into china, I might go to jail."*

In fact, most of the 20 respondents interviewed show that they would not introduce female relatives and friends from their hometowns to China, and the reason

is basically the same as *TU6*. This shows that the Myanmar government's propaganda on anti-trafficking in women is effective.

For the type of meeting through an unfamiliar intermediary, it belongs to commercial or a business network, which aims at making profits. In this fieldwork, only *TRI* realized marriage by a commercial intermediary. Through the description of *TRI* and her Chinese husband, the process of her move to China was as follows: a female broker went to her house in Myanmar, and asked her if she wants to marry in China. Since she could not bear the frequent violence from her father, she did not hesitate for a long time, then followed this woman to leave. The woman gave her an entry permit and took her to Ruili. At the same time, the broker was also in contact with her husband who worked at Ruili, and they met under the broker's arrangement. After both parties agreed, her husband paid the broker an introduction fee of about 60,000 RMB [8800US dollars]. *TRI* then followed her husband back to Tengchong, her husband's home, to settle down.

And the type of meeting through social activities is complex, because it can be either a network of acquaintances, such as weddings or funerals, or a personal network, such as national festivals celebrations. just like the cases of *RU3* and *RU4* as mentioned above section, they met their husbands in celebrations of Thingyan Festival and Pauk Phaw Festival respectively, in Ruili. Furthermore, there is the case of *RU6*, who is from Pang Hseng, Shan State. She told me that she was born in a China-Myanmar transnational family too, since her mother is Chinese and her father is Myanmar person, so she has many relatives and friends not only in Myanmar, but also in China. She met her husband at a party with her Chinese friends.

***ii. How do they build their social networks after marriage?***

***(1) Wechat has become a new tool to help expand social networks in China***

Figure 20 shows us the 20 respondents' communication devices or social software available in China. They all use mobile phones in China, the most commonly

used app is Wechat, followed by QQ. Wechat is an app without geographical restrictions. It can connect people as long as there is a net. Mobile phones and Wechat have become channels for Myanmar women to connect with family, friends and others. Following Figure 20, group interviews are main method, and most respondents come from same region and know each other, which have their own network. Myanmar wives who know each other would set up Wechat groups, in where usually they share laws and regulations, current affairs, news, life information, jokes, etc. and sometimes, seek help from each other. Moreover, Wechat can be used to sell goods and become a way for them to expand their social network and get to know more Myanmar women.

*TU2 who is the most educational person in 20 respondents (she completed her undergraduate degree as an international student at Yunnan Minzu University) created a WeChat group of Myanmar women who marry Chinese men and said, "To create such a group is mainly to facilitate our contacts. We are all from Myanmar, and this WeChat group will give us a sense of belonging. Generally, we share our life experience, or exchange current news, or China's laws and regulations; some people will also recommend products or find business partners in the group, etc."*

### **(2) Organize activities to know each other**

During the interviews, Myanmar women who have their own WeChat group said that although they don't know all people in the group, they still trust each other because they know all people were added by acquaintances. They may have sense of isolation when they first arrived in China. It's fine to have a group for themselves. And people in the group (usually the group owner) organize various activities at regular intervals to help expand their social circle.



#### 5.4 The differences when Myanmar women choose a rural marriage or urban marriage.

During the field survey, there were interesting findings should be mention that through visiting transnational families in urban and rural areas, some of their situations are differences.

##### *i. Different living conditions show as Figure 21.*

*Figure 21 Living conditions of Myanmar Women Living in Rural and Urban areas*



*Note: the picture on the left is a Myanmar woman (TC2) who lived in Tengchong city center; the picture on the right is a Myanmar woman (TR1) who lived in rural Tengchong.*

Most intuitively, the living conditions of Myanmar women in the rural are not as good as those in the urban. The women's home in the city is clean and tidy modern architecture and the homes in rural areas are dull, simple tiled houses.

##### *ii. Legal document holding is different: see Figure 22.*

Figure 22 demonstrates that no women in rural marriage holds legal marriage certificates, and only three women in urban marriage don't hold marriage certificates. Once without marriage certificate, the marriage relationship would be considered illegal and Myanmar women most likely repatriated. Additionally, they can't register in Chinese household system (*Hukou*), which would directly lead to the inability to enjoy medical insurance, minimum living security system or other benefits. The same problem will affect their parents and children, especially their children. If kids fail to register in household system, they're not eligible to receive free compulsory education

in China (Huang and Long 2017, 69). Due to the lack of marriage certificate, they can't work outside and cross the limited border areas, which implementation of agency is more limited. Myanmar women in urban marriages may live in a better situation than who choose rural marriages. The rural women show more vulnerability.

*Figure 22 Legal Document Holding Condition for the 20 Respondents*

Reference Number of Interviewee	Home(China) in Urban/Rural	Marriage Certificate	Age of getting Marriage/Age of Feb. 2019	Years of Marriage (Feb. 019)	Children (Feb. 2019)	Children' Hukou
RU1	Urban area	No	21/33	>12 years	2 son (11/5 years old)	Eldest son: Registered Youngest son: Un-registered
RU2	Urban area	Yes	23/37	>14 years	2 son (16/12 years old)	Eldest son: Un-Registered (This child is the kid of her ex-Myanmar husband) Youngest son: Registered
RR1	Rural area	No	21/23	< 2 year	No	/
RU3	Urban area	No	20/22	>2 year	No	/
RU4	Urban area	No	20/22	<2 year	No	/
RU5	Urban area	Yes	26/32	>6 years	1 son (5 years old)	Registered
RU6	Urban area	Yes	20/26	>6 years	less 1 year old	/
RR2	Rural area	No	28/36	>8years	1 son (7 years old) 1 daughter (5 years old)	Registered
RR3	Rural arca	No	23/31	>8 years	1 son (6 years old)	Registered
RR4	Rural area	No	20/24	>4years	1 son (less 1 year old)	Un-registered
TU1	Urban area	Yes	23/28	>5years	2 son (4/ less1 year(s) old)	Registered
TU2	Urban area	Yes	25/32	>7years	1 son (3 years old) 2 daughters (7/5 years old)	Registered
TU3	Urban area	Yes	23/25	>2 years	1 son (less 1 year old)	Registered
TR1	Rural area	No		>3 years	1 son (1 year old)	Registered
TU4	Urban area	Yes	21/35	>14 years	2 son (13/9 years old) 1 daughter (6 years old)	Registered
TU5	Urban area	Yes	20/31	>11 years	2 daughters (9/7 years old)	Registered
TU6	Urban area	Yes	22/28	>6 years	1 son (5 years old) 2 daughters (less 1 year old)	Registered
TR2	Rural arca	No	33/36	>3 years	4 son (16/10/8/1 year(s) old) 2 daughter (14/5 years old)	She got 5 kids (3 sons and 2daughter) with her first Myanmar husband. So the five kids can not register; The youngest son with her Chinese husband: Registered
TR3	Rural area	No	25/31	>6 years	1 son (3 years old) 1 daughter (5 years old)	Registered
TR4	Rural area	No	18/20	>1.5 years	No	/

*Note: Since the thesis fieldwork spanned July 2018 to Feb 2019, "the age" and marriage year(s) for those interviewed is calculated up to Feb 2019 in order to get a standard result.*

However, this vulnerability does not seem to be a serious obstacle to these Myanmar women in rural marriages.

*Just like TR3 who married into the rural area said, "I visited a Chinese acquaintance and found the life there was better even if it was rural village."*

What they care more about seems to be that the current life is better than before. Besides, Figure 22 shows that all their children with Chinese husband could register in Chinese *hukou* system, which means their children can enjoy the rights of Chinese citizens. Under this circumstance, most Myanmar women who did not obtain legal documents in this interview said that it is good enough that their children can legally study and live in China. It is not too important whether their own rights and interests could be protected by law or not.

### 5.5 Conclusion

By interviewing 20 Myanmar women who married men in Ruili and Tongcheng districts of southwestern Yunnan, this chapter has sought to understand the reasons these women have entered transnational marriage and to point out how Myanmar women engage themselves in the process of marriage through social networks, at the same time, examine how they build new social networks to help them adapt and integrate into new life faster in their Chinese husbands' community. In addition, this chapter also analyses some of the living conditions of these Myanmar women after marriage by comparing differences when Myanmar women choose a rural marriage or urban marriage. These analyses aim to understand to what extent a rural marriage or urban marriage has improved the lives of these Myanmar women or to what extent they have achieved their goals or expectations after marriage.

Myanmar women's choices and decisions about marriage – her exercise of “agency” – runs through the whole process of establishing transnational marriage, from their motivation-driven marriage decisions, to the realization of marriage across the border, to the post-marital life. These 20 Myanmar women who married men in Yunnan have executed their agency within their voluntary marriage through expanded social networks beyond just those of their families or communities to achieve their will and their goal, whether that is to enter into a marriage out of free love, to escape domestic violence and civil war in northern Myanmar, to find a better socioeconomic livelihood, to reconnect older ethnic bonds, to find a higher-status spouse in China,

among other reasons. And based on these diverse reasons for choosing to marry men in Yunnan, the Myanmar women could actively engage and expand these social networks, whether those dominated by kin groups or those shaped by business networks – including work or study relations, parents, relative, friends, social activities, unfamiliar intermediary, etc. – to achieve their marriage. After marriage, they still often created or expanded their social network to help themselves better integrate into their community in Yunnan and to maintain links with Myanmar people, both in Yunnan and in Myanmar. The diversity of reasons and social networks for Myanmar women to marry autonomously with men in southwestern Yunnan in recently decades helps to better understand not only the growing numbers of women from northern Myanmar who marry Chinese men and choose to move to Yunnan but also to understand how agency is part of a majority of these marriage decisions.

Moreover, by describing the post-marital lives of these 20 Myanmar women, we can see that their lives in China are generally less burdened than in Myanmar, especially, their work after marriage is easier than that before marriage. But when it comes to distinguishing Myanmar women who choose urban marriages from those who choose rural marriages, it can be found that the women in urban marriage live in a better life and the degree that they hold legal documents related to marriage is higher. By contrast, the women in rural marriage live in a comparatively worse environment. In the meantime, the phenomenon of lack of legal documents (e.g. marriage certificates) is very serious, which means that they will not or less be able to enjoy the legal protection and welfare of China, and will be subject to more legal restrictions. In this instance, the disadvantaged position of the Myanmar women in rural marriage will be strengthened, and further, their degree of agency expression is lower than that of the women in urban marriage. But despite this, according to the interview results, these Myanmar women are not very concerned about choosing an urban marriage or rural marriage, they seem to care more about how they live now.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis has examined the reasons for the growth of “Burmese brides”—Myanmar women who move to China to marry Chinese men—in southwestern Yunnan province in China. Over the past two decades, the number of transnational marriages on the China-Myanmar border has grown, with Yunnan province being one important growth area, especially since 2008 (Chen 2018, 118). This growth is dominated by transnational marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men and forms one main type of transnational migration into China from Myanmar (Chen 2018, 120). These women have become a social concern and been widely labeled “Burmese brides” in the mass media of China, Myanmar and Western countries and often been represented as victims of human trafficking, fake marriages, HIV-AIDS, etc.,. Such labels and images not only stigmatizes the women as vulnerable victims who lack the ability to choose – to exercise agency – in a faceless transnational marriage process in the public imagination, but it also ignores more common types of marriage practices, such as voluntary marriage. Thus, this thesis sought to explain the expansion of China-Myanmar transnational marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men along the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier since 2000 from two main perspectives: a macro, structural perspective and an individual, agency-centered perspective. By using these two perspectives, it is possible to produce a fuller and richer understanding who the women from Myanmar who marry men in Yunnan are and why they choose to marry Chinese men.

The research is based on analyzing media reports about “Burmese brides” issues and 20 interviews with Myanmar women who marry Chinese men conducted between July 2018 and February 2019 in rural and urban areas of Ruili and Tengchong districts, located in Dehong prefecture and Baoshan city, respectively. These analyses aim to identify the reasons for the growth of transnational marriages between women

from Myanmar with men in border areas of Yunnan and show how and why these patterns of China-Myanmar transnational marriages have changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, the thesis seeks to the role of the agency and the reasons of Myanmar women in marrying Chinese men.

*i. From a structural perspective:*

The expansion of transnational marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese on the Myanmar-Yunnan frontier is an inevitable outcome of broad feminization in transnational migration. Feminization is seen as a key recent trend of global migration (Castles, Haas, and Miller 2014, 16-17). In transnational marriage migration, the mode of female migrants from less developed countries to more developed countries through marriage has been dominant. Back in around the 1970s, there was a feminization within East and Southeast Asia countries: more women from less developed countries mainland of China, Vietnam, Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Laos get married with men from more developed countries Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. In recent years, the rapid development of China's economy has widened the economic gap between China and its neighbors in mainland Southeast Asia, making China a relatively more developed country towards to Myanmar, Vietnam, Lao, Cambodia.

In addition, up to now, 16 transnational ethnic groups have been identified on the China-Myanmar border, and each shares the same or similar language, customs and so on. The Myanmar Shan ethnic group resembles the Chinese Dai minority, and the Kachin ethnic group of Myanmar is like the Jingpo ethnic group in China. Among these transnational ethnic groups, they have strong connection in kinship, ethnicity and geography, and the traditional same-ethnic marriage is common in their culture and history. Therefore, transnational marriages in border areas are mainly same-ethnic marriages. But in recent years, this scope of same-ethnic marriages has expanded to cross-ethnic marriage. And geographically, it has also started to expand from border areas to inland China dominated by the type that Myanmar woman married into

China. So the China-Myanmar transnational marriage is less confined to the same-ethnic group and the border areas, which leads to the expansion of those transnational marriages to more ethnic groups and to more non-border areas inland in China.

Moreover, from the angle of migration theory, there are pull factors and push factors in China as receiving country and Myanmar as sending country, which make Myanmar women choose to move to China to marry Chinese men. First, the economic disparity between China and Myanmar is an obvious factor. China's economic development is better than Myanmar's, making many Myanmar women move to China, hoping to find opportunities to improve social and economic vulnerability. Second, gender imbalance and marriage squeeze in China a serious social problem. Since there are more males than females in China, it is difficult for many more males to find suitable local females as spouses, especially in remote rural areas. This problem exists in Yunnan Province and its border cities connected to Myanmar, which made those men need to seek a "wife" from neighboring countries. There are also some factors that have prompted women to move out of Myanmar. And these are due to two major social problems in Myanmar: the civil war and persecution of AIDS and drugs in northern Myanmar. On the one hand, the ethnic issue in Myanmar has not been resolved, and the conflict between the Myanmar government and the ethnic armed forces in northern Myanmar continues, resulting in a large number of border residents flooding into China to escape the war. In order to seek a stable living environment, marrying into Chinese territory for Myanmar border people, especially women, is a better choice. At the same time, these conflicts often make trafficking in women to China more rampant. On the other hand, North Myanmar is a major disaster area for drug and AIDS problems, especially among men. This makes Myanmar women want to marry into a healthy marriage in China for a stable and better life.

More importantly, with the growth of marriage between Myanmar women and Chinese men in China and Myanmar, these marriages have already existed as illegal

and undocumented forms of marriage, because these couples can't obtain legal marriage certificates. The main reasons for the failure of legally registered marriages: (1) from Myanmar side: one is because northern ethnic women face difficulties in obtaining identification (ID card or passport) and marital status (single certificate) from Myanmar government; another one is that Myanmar women lack legal awareness about applying for legal marriage certificate. (2) from China side: In order to combat human trafficking and to comply with the requirements of the Myanmar government, Chinese laws have a fixed requirement for Myanmar women's identity documents to register legal marriages. However, this is the exactly dilemma faced by women in Myanmar. (3) from international community side, they tend to regard "Burmese brides" as an illegal phenomenon. This may be because their work pays more attention to human rights issues like human trafficking, so that the existence of women who voluntarily marry Chinese people is ignored. Sometimes, with some transnational marriages, it's difficult to tell whether the "bride's price" is a kind of practice of cultural custom in Myanmar and China or a profit from human trafficking.

***ii. From an individual agency-centered perspective:***

This thesis argues that women's agency – their powers to choose on their own – towards to transnational marriage is an important angle to understand different marriage practices. With the limitations of external conditions, they cannot, in part or in whole, allow themselves to participate in the process of completing a marriage based on their will, which makes them practice differently. Therefore, according to the extent of Myanmar women's agency exercise in their transnational marriage, their practices of marriage are divided into forced marriage with low or no agency, commercial marriage with partial agency and voluntary marriage with more or full agency. Combining numerous reports from authoritative media or non-governmental organizations on the issue of "Burmese brides", this paper shows how Myanmar women are passively or actively involved in forced marriage, commercial marriage and voluntary marriage, and emphasizes that forced marriage is only one of the



practical models. More Myanmar women in the border area have autonomy and voluntary ability in commercial marriage and voluntary marriage, especially voluntary marriage that is estimated to account for at least 60% by KWAT and JHSPH in a recent study about forced marriage and forced child bearing of Myanmar women towards to China, while forced marriage accounts for less than 40%.

By interviewing 20 Myanmar women who married men in Ruili and Tongcheng districts of Yunnan, the research illustrates that these Myanmar women are able to exercise agency in their transnational marriage to a great extent based on their diversified motivations that is to enter into a marriage out of free love, to escape domestic violence and civil war in northern Myanmar, to find a better socioeconomic livelihood, to reconnect older ethnic bonds, to find a higher-status spouse in China etc. At the same time, this study finds that social networks play an important role as a connection in the process of Myanmar women's cross-border marriage, whether before or after marriage. (1) the social network before marriage. Border trade between China and Myanmar was a strong social network. It encourages the development of economic interactions, cultural and sports cooperation in border areas and permits border people crossing the border to participate in religious activities, visit relatives and friends, seek medical treatment, engage in commercial trade, and celebrate traditional national festivals. All of those provide a platform for reciprocal exchanges between Myanmar women and Chinese men. Moreover, there is often have kinship social network in border areas due to ethnic and kinship ties of border people. Hence, there are some girls who are introduced or arranged to marry someone from China through friends, relatives and parents. Another business social network also is used into China-Myanmar transnational marriage. This kind of social network is mostly used in commercial marriages. It mainly introduces Myanmar women and Chinese men getting to know each other and promotes marriage through a paid intermediary or broker. (2) the social network after marriage. Myanmar women can also build and expand their social networks in some ways to help them adapt and integrate into the

new life of their Chinese husband's community more quickly. These ways include using social software to build groups or organize activities to connect themselves.

These transnational marriages stem from Myanmar women's autonomous choice. They engage in the process of marriage through social networks to realize their will and their goals rather than being forced. However, it is worth noting here that although these Myanmar women are claimed that they are in voluntary marriages, the disadvantages of the Myanmar women who marry into rural area of china may be stronger than the women who are in urban marriages, and their agency are less expressive than women in urban marriages since their conditions of living and holding a marriage certificate are worse than the women in urban marriages. But following the interview results, these Myanmar women are not very concerned about choosing an urban marriage or rural marriage, they seem to care more about how they live now.

In brief, I write this thesis not only to correct the stigma and stereotype of Myanmar women who married to Chinese men as "Burmese brides" that is related to human trafficking and forced marriage, but also to make people realize that in border areas, the number of autonomous marriages (especially voluntary marriages) is much larger than that of forced marriages. Within these autonomous marriages, those Myanmar women could exercise their agency with their different motivations. Therefore, the thesis calls for more attentions to agency of Myanmar women who voluntarily marry Chinese men to understand their true wills and wishes more comprehensively and give them a fair social opinion and comment which are more relevant as "wives" rather than "brides".

This thesis identifies the reasons for the growth of transnational marriages between Myanmar women with men in Yunnan and interprets the changing transnational marriage patterns and practices of Myanmar women on the China-Myanmar frontier. In doing so, it shows how the structural features affect these choices by shaping and influencing the marriage context within which northern Myanmar women choose whom, when, where, how to and why they marry men in Yunnan. After analyzing the

reasons and social networks of Myanmar women marrying men in Yunnan, this thesis found that Myanmar women could actively use their social networks to achieve their marriage goals, even though these women had various reasons for their marriage. They were able to expand or engage their social network to help them become better integrated into their Chinese husband's family and the surrounding community.

In short, even if there are some limitations imposed by the context of marriage due to constraints of the structural features shaping marriage opportunities as discussed in this thesis, most Myanmar women in the Myanmar-Yunnan border area still are able to have considerable decision-making power over their marriages. They could choose who, when and how to marry by themselves based on their own free will and motivation, which means most they could exercise their agency in the marriage process, despite some experiencing some constraints in the marriage-making process.

## **6.2 Limitations**

When I went to the Chinese government department for an interview and some data about Myanmar women in China, the government staff did not want to disclose them to me on the grounds of the data may be related to national security, which made me to rely more on second-hand data from other scholars or reports. In addition, due to the lack of some statistical data on Myanmar, most of the data in this thesis are from China and the international community (UN, NGOs, etc.).

Due to the lack of funds and manpower, I didn't complete more interviews and collect more comprehensive first-hand information. The interviewees in the field work of the thesis were not much, only 20 people. Besides, due to the difficult mountain roads in the rural areas of the border, weather and other reasons, the number of Myanmar women who married in rural is less than that of who married in urban, respectively 8 and 12 people.

Another limitation is that the thesis involves many laws and regulations from Myanmar and China, some of which are not available in English, so they are

translated by myself. Therefore, the translation may be inaccurate and unofficial to some extent.

### **6.3 Future and further studies**

This thesis is mainly based on transnational marriages occurring on part of the border area between Myanmar and Yunnan Province since 2000. In the last two decades, however, there have been some changes. More of the marriages on the China-Myanmar frontier are marked by “mediated” forms of marriage, partly due to a hardening of the international boundary and the emergence of a stronger legal and regulatory regime there. The thesis has shown that marriages based on ethnic kinship and short-distance migration for the marriage are still dominant – most of which are voluntary marriages. But “mediated marriages” and “inter-ethnic marriages” involving more commercial features and forced marriages related to human trafficking are also significant, and these forms of marriage are more common, especially beyond the border regions and into inland areas of China. These shifts are likely due to the fact that demand for brides in inland areas is still strong, and that China-Myanmar transnational marriage occurring in inland areas of China is harder to regulate. They require more elaborate systems of matching potential grooms to potential brides, often aided by new media platforms. They also require sophisticated smuggling operations to move women further inland. With the decrease in importance of short-distance border-crossing movements and of ethnic kinship in transnational marriages and the growing importance of inter-ethnic marriages of Myanmar women to Chinese men living in inland provincial areas, including large coastal cities, money and brokers matter more and women’s agency matters less for the marriages. And there are more intermediaries needed to help find and connect marriage partners in different ethnic groups over longer distances. So as transnational marriages in non-border areas become more important, the roles of diverse intermediaries grow. Future research can be extended to study this kind of marriage beyond Yunnan Province and it would be interesting.

With the increase of “mediated marriages”, the roles of intermediaries or brokers and their networks is greater. Until now, as mentioned in Chapter 1, most public knowledge and mass media reports focus too much on forced marriage, fake marriages, etc. In this situation, the intermediaries are usually considered to exist to benefit themselves or to engage in human traffickers by violating laws. However, this thesis has shown that the intermediaries are diverse, ranging from friends, relatives, unknown persons or even a “Burmese bride” herself. And as shown in chapter 4, China’s State Council prohibits transnational marriage referral agencies, so the intermediary company or institution works in grey or black markets, often based on personal ties that work below the radar of official awareness. It would be interesting to understand how those agencies work in greater detail, to better understand how men and women achieve their transnational marriage – whether in or outside of the law – and to link it to concerns such as national security, social issues, human rights. The intermediaries for marriage would be a good topic to study in the future since they are a key part of such mediated transnational marriages.

In this research, it has been shown that with China's economic development, China has become a marriage immigrant receiving country towards to neighboring countries in mainland Southeast Asia. Since such transnational marriages are short-distance transnational marriages and link with transnational ethnic groups, that is to say, transnational marriages between China and neighboring countries in mainland Southeast Asia may share some similarities. Therefore, the further study could compare the similarities and differences between these transnational marriages to provide a wider overview about the connection between China and mainland Southeast Asia.

The analyses of this thesis mainly studies women’s agency in transnational marriage works from the perspective of Myanmar women who are married to Chinese. In the future, it may analyze from the perspective of Chinese men who marry women

in Myanmar, which will make China-Myanmar transnational marriage more comprehensive.



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