

# *Identity and Public Administration of the Myanmar Settlers on China's Border: A Comparative-Empirical Study of Myanmar Students and Local Officials\**

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## *Abstract*

Based on the interviews and questionnaires with 45 Myanmar settlers and 55 administrative staff living and working in three border areas (two cities and one county) in southwest China, this article aims to explore the political, cultural, and social identity of the Myanmar settlers. In addition, this article compares responses from Myanmar settlers and local Chinese officials in order to more thoroughly analyze the situation of the immigrants. It finds that the immigrants' social, cultural and political connection with China is strong. Thus there is not a big concern regarding the impact generated from the immigrants' diverse identities to the local administration. This article suggests that some measures should be adopted to help the newcomers integrate into local society, which can not only help the immigrants to improve their quality of life but can also improve social stability and order. In a

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theoretical sense, this article also examines challenges caused by social diversity to a government who wants to maintain social harmony and safeguard social order.

China is renowned for its mammoth size population. However, in recent years, China has also become well-known for the number of its citizens who emigrate to developed countries.<sup>1</sup> It would appear that China is merely a huge immigrant-producing country; however, this is not the entire story, as “China is also rapidly becoming an important destination of international migrants.”<sup>2</sup> A large number of foreign settlers, including legal immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and refugees from Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, have settled on the boundary of southwest China for a variety of reasons. Therefore, border control is becoming increasingly crucial, especially for the China-Myanmar border. For example, during the Kachin State War with Myanmar in 2011, it has been reported that “the fighting in Kachin state has generated a series of problems for China. It worries that it might trigger a large-scale influx of refugees across the porous border into Yunnan province.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the local authorities in Yunnan, there were approximately 1,000 to 5,000 thousand refugees living in the southwest border regions of Yunnan at any given time in 2013.<sup>4</sup> The number has been estimated to have grown during the war from 37,000 to 70,000 in 2009 and 2015 respectively.<sup>5</sup> During the period of this war, “the Yunnan government opened seven refugee camps and supplied humanitarian aid to an estimated 13,000 refugees, setting up more than 1,000 tents and providing 10 million yuan (about \$1.46 million) worth of food, drinking water, and medical aid.”<sup>6</sup> This immense influx of refugees is considered to be “a serious security threat to China and Chinese interests.”<sup>7</sup> So far, the civil war in Myanmar has shown no signs of ceasing.<sup>8</sup> As a result of hearing about the unrest on the southwest border, the Chinese people have begun to realize the seriousness of immigrant issues and are highly concerned about the corresponding influence on the social and public administration in the area.

The relationship between China and Myanmar has always been complicated.<sup>9</sup> However, the fact remains that there are close ethnic, political, cultural, and economic ties that exist between the inhabitants living on both sides of the border. China and Myanmar propagandize the special nature of their connections, such as the so-called “paukphaw’