

Burmese Attitude toward Chinese: Portrayal of the Chinese in Contemporary Cultural and Media Works

Min Zin

Abstract: This paper argues that since at least the mid 1980s, there has been an observable negative attitude among the people of Burma against the Chinese. Such sentiment is not just transient public opinion, but an attitude. The author measures it by studying contemporary cultural and media works as found in legally published expressions, so as to exclude any material rejected by the regime's censors. The causes of such sentiment are various: massive Chinese migration and purchases of real estate (especially in Upper Burma), Chinese money that is inflating the cost of everything, and cultural "intrusion." The sentiment extends to the military, as well: the article examines a dozen memoirs of former military generals and finds that Burma's generals do not trust the Chinese, a legacy of China's interference in Burma's civil war until the 1980s. The public outcry over the Myitsone dam issue, however, was the most significant expression of such sentiment since 1969, when anti-Chinese riots broke out in Burma. The relaxation of media restrictions under the new government has allowed this expression to gather steam and spread throughout the country, especially in private weekly journals that are becoming more outspoken and daring in pushing the boundaries of the state's restrictions.

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1 Introduction

In the wake of the 1988 prodemocracy popular uprising, and the follow-up military takeover, relations between Burma and China have profoundly deepened in terms of political, economic and military cooperation with internal and international ramifications. Analysts have conducted research works to track and interpret this unique so-called *pauq-p'aw*¹ (*pauk-phaw*: fraternal) relations, and predict future directions.²

Many of them focus on the systemic level of analysis by studying the Burmese state's relative position vis-à-vis China's preponderance, and the interactions between the two countries. These studies attempt to explain the political, economic and security implications of the Sino–Burma relationship. They tend to see Burma as the younger sibling in the *pauq-p'aw* relationship with a nationalistic and strategic culture (Tin Maung Maung Than 2003), who has ability to manage its own affairs in the face of China's overwhelming strategic weight (Selth 2003), even to bargain reciprocal and mutual benefits despite the uneven and asymmetrical ties (Poon Kim Shee 2002; Haacke 2006), and also to play the “China card” to gain the best advantage out of regional power rivalries (Malik 2000; Guan 2001; Maung Aung Myoe 2011). Other scholars and policy groups are more concerned with Burma's “cliental status” and “playing with fire” strategy (Seekins 1997; Malik 2000; ICG 2001). Within this systemic level of analysis, Chinese perspectives have also become pronounced in recent years. These studies point out how the Chinese government has adjusted its policy toward Burma by giving “friendly and timely advice to Myanmar leaders” (Li 2008), and even make a constructivist note that the Chinese approach to Burma reflects regional norms (Lee, Chan, and Chan 2009). Some analysts insist that the international community should encourage China to take actions contributing to Burma's reform (ICG 2009), and others hold that China's interest and its political tradition may lead Beijing to appreciate “realist reasons for intervention” (Holliday 2009).

1 Instead of random romanisation of Burmese scripts, I here use John Okell's transcription system, which aims to represent the sounds of Burmese speech, irrespective of the spelling (Okell 1971). If there are already widely used transliterated letters such as *pauk-phaw* and *Myitson* I will mention them as well.

2 The first draft of this paper was presented at “China-Myanmar Relations: The Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence” conference, held November 4, 2011, in Georgetown University, Washington DC. I am very grateful to Saya U Saw Tun for guiding me to use Okell's transcription system consistently. I also thank May Nyane, Camilla Buzzi, David Steinberg, Maxwell Harrington and the editors of the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* for their helpful comments and editing works.

The systemic analysts discuss the issues of internal culture and the social and political characteristics of Sino–Burma relations only in passing. To my best knowledge, only a few scholars attempt to engage in domestic level analysis by unpacking Chinese identity formation, different patterns of assimilation over time in Burma (Mya Than 1997; Tong 2010), and Chinese domination in Upper Burma (Mya Maung 1994). These studies, however, capture only the changing status and influence of Chinese in Burmese society. They do not analyse the social, cultural and political attitudes and reactions of the population of Burma with regard to Sino–Burmese relations.

This article seeks to partly fill this gap in the existing literature. The puzzles I intend to address in this chapter are (1) whether or not there is a negative attitude among the people of Burma against Chinese; (2) if so, how can we measure it? How do we know it; and (3) does the intensity of resentment vary in terms of time and geographical location? My primary purpose is descriptive rather than explanatory since I do not ascribe ‘the attitude’ as an independent variable and do not make any causal argument.

This article will be divided into six sections. I will give definitions of the key concepts used in this paper in the following section. Then, I will explain a research approach I adopt, and why I use particular evidences as measurement in this article. In the fourth section, I will present the Burmese state’s attitude toward Chinese. Then I will offer societal attitude on the Chinese presence in Burma. In the conclusion section, I will recap my findings, offer two key implications for Sino–Burma relations and also explain the limit of my research and possible future works on this particular topic. First of all, we should start with a working consensus on what we are talking about. This is to what I am now going to turn.

2 Conceptual Definitions

The attitude in this chapter means the positive or negative psychological orientation of Burmese toward Chinese. I follow classical definition of orientation as “the internalized aspects of objects and relationships.”³ The attitudes of a society are, of course, not homogenous, monolithic, coherent, or compact. As Verba notes, “[t]he degree to which basic political attitudes are shared within a political system thus becomes a crucial but open question” (Verba 1969: 526). Burmese here means the people of Burma, whereas Burman is the majority ethnic group of Burma.

3 Almond and Verba 1963: 14. They elaborate by distinguishing three different orientations: ‘cognitive,’ ‘affective,’ and ‘evaluational’ orientations.

Defining ‘Chinese’ is a bit elusive. But here it means newly immigrated Chinese settling or working in Burma in the wake of the 1988 military takeover, and their association with China in terms of loyalty, financial or other institutional connections. Newly immigrant Chinese and China appear to be synonymous in many of the cultural and media expressions we study.

One important caveat about the use of Chinese in Burmese language should be noted. In English, scholars use ‘ethnic Chinese’ or ‘Chinese ethnics’ living in Burma. In Burmese usage, however, Chinese doesn’t receive *tàin-yìn-dhà* (ethnic nationality or indigenous ethnic/ race) status. In the language of common Burmese, Chinese is used as a race, *tǎyouq lu-myò* (*Tayote Lumyo*: Chinese race), not *tǎyouq tàin-yìn-dhà* (ethnic Chinese or Chinese ethnic nationality). Burmese often call *tǎyouq kālā lu-myò-jà myà* (Chinese and Indian foreign races). When successive Burmese regimes use the term ‘national races,’ they do not cover Chinese. The Chinese government’s persistent use of the term ‘oversea Chinese’ reinforces the image of the un-indigenoussness of Chinese living in Burma. In short, Chinese are not perceived as indigenous ethnic/ race in Burmese usage. The population of Chinese descent currently living in Burma is close to 2.5 million.⁴

3 Research Approach

When we attempt to assess the psychological orientation of Burmese people toward Chinese, the question immediately arises about our methodology. How do we know the Burmese attitude toward Chinese? Specifically speaking, how do we measure ‘anti-Chinese attitude’ among Burmese if there is such sentiment prevailing in Burmese society? One method scholars tend to use is a survey. However, I have dropped the survey method for three reasons. First, since Sino–Burma relations is a politically sensitive issue, it is not possible to design a transparent survey and expect a reliable and valid survey result under an authoritarian regime. Second, a one-time survey can only reveal transient public opinion. As the attitude is stickier and lasting longer than public opinion, a one-time survey does not help our purpose. Third, since I do not have longitudinal data or cannot draw on any previous independent surveys executed by other scholars, I have decided not to rely on survey for this particular article.

Instead, I choose to look at expressions of contemporary cultural and media works such as poems, short stories, magazine and journal articles, cartoons, jokes of comedians, songs, photo essays, etc. The main reason for

4 Guo 2007. Some estimates that the number will be up to 5 millions (This author’s interview with Chinese merchants in May 2011).

this choice is that cultural and media works are produced by public figures such as social critics, writers, and artists, and they tend to form as well as reflect public opinions. Since I have chosen the period from 1988 to 2011 for my study, these works can capture a pattern of public opinions; in other word, the attitude.

I will confine my study to legally published or censored works. Since these works had to go through the heavy-handed censorship of the government, they can be categorized as hard cases. Some of them are direct cultural and media works against Chinese domination in Burma, while many of them are indirect and between-the-lines expressions. The former are rare cases but rapidly prolific in Burma recently, and the latter cover wide-ranging issues such as the real-estate market, natural gas, logging, cheap and unsafe commodities, and the Irrawaddy River. In terms of medium, I will also use web pages posted from Burmese media inside the country as part of the evidence.

4 The State's Attitude toward Chinese

Before proceeding to Burmese societal attitude toward Chinese, let's briefly investigate the state's attitude or perception toward China/ Chinese because the state and its agents largely define a parameter of societal expression in authoritarian Burma. According to memos and meeting minutes of the junta, the prevailing attitude is distrustful toward China and Chinese. However, since we only rely on legally published documents, we cannot use such 'leaked' or 'confidential' or 'privately acquired' texts. Therefore, I look at a proximate measure that demonstrates the closest reflection of the attitude of the state and its agents. The proximate measure I choose is memoirs of ex-generals, many of them founding members of the military junta in 1988.

After reading about a dozen of the former generals' memoirs, we can confidently conclude that the Burmese military generals don't trust the Chinese. They described their hard-fought battles against the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, which received massive Chinese support, as a struggle against foreign invasion via a proxy. Brig. Gen. Than Tin, who is a mastermind of Burma's notorious 'Four Cuts Counter-insurgency Policy' (Smith 1999), writes in his memoir:

[b]y having their back being covered by the neighboring country, the insurgents we are facing receive whatever they want including manpower, weapons and ammunitions, and other administrative guidance (Than Tin 2009: 384).

The top generals appear to believe that Burma's sovereignty was at risk in the face of the Chinese-backed CPB insurgency. Than Tin makes it clear in his memoir:

CPB Communist overseas led by Thakin Ba Thein Tin drafted a Mò-Louñ-Hein Five Year Plan to penetrate heartland Burma gradually and occupy the whole country with the helps of neighboring country (Than Tin 2009: 263).

Another top general, Gen. Chit Swe, who was a founding member of the coup-making State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)⁵ in 1988, mentioned a similar reflection in his memoir:

[t]he advantages of CPB Communist are possession of new weaponry. Another obvious advantage is they have secured backing. They receive strong military and logistic supports (Naung Sit-the 2006: 632).

The generals often blame Chinese for the CPB's foreign accessibility. Gen. Tint Swe, another influential figure among the military top brass, recalls his observation: "CPB Communists received training from Chinese communists, and reached out to the international community" (Tint Swe 2010: 158).

These memoirs were published under the SPDC regime's strict censorship rules, which prohibit any writing detrimental to the country's foreign relations, especially with its major supporter, China. Thus, the former generals could not manage to write their perception of Chinese interference in Burma's civil war without tacit agreement from their fellow incumbent generals. We can fairly assume that these perceptions appear to be widely shared among the warrior generals of the Burmese state.

5 Societal Attitude toward Chinese

5.1 Post-1988 Popular Uprising: Social and Cultural Backlash

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the societal figures of Burma were mostly pro-Chinese because left-leaning writers dominated public discourse. In the aftermath of 1988, however, the discourse has changed due to public intellectuals' disillusionment with China switching sides: its abandonment of the CPB and embrace of the junta that cracked down on the popular uprising. More importantly, massive Chinese migration and purchases of real estate, take-over of businesses, and sensational inci-

5 The junta changed its name from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997.

dents of abuses against local people particularly in Upper Burma have triggered intense public outrage. Societal figures either lead or reflect such outrage.

The first notable expression came as a collection of seven short stories, the *wāthboundāre leq-yè* (*Handwriting of Guardian Spirit of the Earth*), which was published in November 1989 from *à-bwà-yè* (Kyeppwa Yay) Publishing House. All seven stories written by famous novelists in the mid- and late-1980s showed a clear anti-Chinese undercurrent. One of the short stories from this collection, “*zābājī mwe*” (*Sabagyī-hmwe*: Python) written by Nyi Pu Lay, was translated into English by Anna Allott. In her Internet edition, Allott contextualizes the story:

The python of the title refers to the Chinese and Sino–Burmese businessmen, drug traffickers, and gem dealers who are disliked by many Burmese, since they are perceived as moving into Mandalay and squeezing out the Burmese: laundering their illegal profits by investing in property, they are seen as driving up house prices to a point where the Burmese, who are struggling to make an honest living, are forced to sell up and move out of their old family houses, in prime downtown sites, to the outer suburbs, the ‘new pastures’ of the story, many of which have been newly built on former paddy fields (Allott 2003).

In fact, all seven short stories in the *wāthboundāre leq-yè* collection covered the changing community and cultural landscape in Upper Burma thanks to newly immigrated Chinese who have replaced native residents with massive real estate purchases and who have dominated businesses. Their stories captured the social dread of local Burmese for disintegration of their social fabric, which is in many ways resonant with the Furnivallian description of pyramid structure of “plural society” (Furnivall 1956). However, the stories written under heavy censorship did not explicitly mention the word ‘Chinese.’ They symbolized Chinese by describing the characters’ heavy accents, fair or yellowish skin, self-referring pronoun *Wa*, which means “I” that Chinese in Burma use, style of dresses, struggling comprehension of Burmese language, and etc.

Although some public intellectuals and democracy activists, especially in Rangoon, raised a concern about the racially-charged undertones of these stories when the collection came out in 1989,⁶ the timing of the publication of the *wāthboundāre leq-yè* was well recognized as the first strike of societal actors against the Chinese penetration of Burmese society.

6 Author’s interviews with two well-known writers in Rangoon, and three democracy activists, 9-11 August 2011.

In the early 1990s, a number of monthly business magazines were allowed to publish. Some novelists became regular contributors as magazine feature writers, and they wrote articles about newly thriving Sino–Burma border trades, real estate markets, and changing socio-economic conditions of the country in those magazines. Writers such as Kyaw Yin Myint and Nay Win Myint were prolific, and their works on Chinese socio-economic intrusion in Upper Burma (Kyaw Yin Myint 1993) drew well-deserved attention from scholars (Mya Maung 1994).

Perhaps the most significant writings that persistently focused on Chinese encroachment in Upper Burma came from Ludu Daw Amar, who was actively involved in Burma’s independence struggle and who was also the most influential female journalist/ writer in late 20th century Burma. Daw Amar wrote 137 articles in *kālāya* (*Kalaya Magazine*) under the series title of *āmé shè zāgà* (*Mother’s Old Saying*). The articles appeared between February 1994 and March 2007, and they have been well-received among Burmese readership. They were reproduced in three volumes.

In her preface to *āmé shè zāgà* (Volume I), Daw Amar made a disclaimer: “[t]here are few writings about foreigners in my articles. They are intended not to trigger racial hostility but to encourage cultural preservation.” But she frequently mentioned how Chinese migration and domination have transformed Mandalay, the heart of the last Burmese Kingdom and nationalism, and its culture. For instance, after detailing the sights of Burmese women abandoning *t’amein* (*htamein*: Burmese sarong) and instead wearing pants, Daw Amar complained, “[t]hough we did not see such scenes during the Thakin or Master Era (Colonial period), we now see them in *lām-pan* (rich Chinese businessmen) Era. What can we do?”

The influx of Chinese money, goods and people has inflated the prices of real estate and living so as to drastically reduce the number of ethnic Burmese in central Mandalay, who have been forced to flee to nearby satellite towns. In one of her articles in *āmé shè zāgà*, Daw Amar observed the real estate values are very high in Mandalay, especially if one sells to a foreign race. Then she continued to tell a story of two friends, a couple facing a dilemma regarding the offer they received from a real estate agent. The couple built a house with a compound in 1972 that cost just a little over 100,000 MMK. In the early 1990s, the offer was made to them via the agent that the buyer will give 150 million MMK to buy their house. The wife was so adamant in turning it down when she spoke to her husband who brought the news of the offer. But the wife herself was so amazed and increasingly indecisive due to the incredibly large amount of the offer. She was also concerned that the buyer would be Chinese, to whom she does not want to sell her property to out of sheer anti-Chinese sentiment prevailing among ethnic

Burmese in Mandalay. Daw Amar described the dilemma of her friends artistically as if she was writing a short story. In the end, Daw Amar concluded her article by quoting a thematic line from the Burmese national anthem, “[t]his (Burma) is our nation, this is our land, and we own it.”

In short, Daw Amar’s writings exposed two structural causes, poverty and the distorted market economy, and two agential causes, ‘Superhuman’ (i.e. the generals and their children) and *lām-pan* (rich Chinese businessmen), for Burmese societal disintegration and cultural decline. She denounced the rise of *lām-pan k’i’q* (*Lawpan Khit* or the Era of rich Chinese businessmen) in Burmese society. Daw Amar also urged the public to resist the domination and the “decadent role model” of Superhuman and *lām-pan*.

Meanwhile, some short story writers managed to go around the censorship and portrayed the losing battle of local Burmese against Chinese money and ‘cultural intrusion’ throughout the 1990s. One of the most popular stories is Mandalay writer Win Sithu’s *kara-o-ke nyá-jàn* (*Karaoke Evening*), which was published in *shwe amyū-te meq-gāzīn* (*Shwe Amyutay Magazine*) in January 1993. The story is about the moat of Mandalay’s Royal Palace, which is the symbol of Burma’s last kingdom, of independence, and a source of cultural pride for Burmese, becoming the site of a karaoke bar, where female singers with mini-skirts entertain Chinese customers with Chinese songs, and the drunk man throws up into the moat. Another noted short story in the same theme was Nay Win Myint’s *yādāna-boun nyá myà* (*The Nights of Mandalay*), which was published in *yin-k’oun-bwīn meq-gāzīn* (*Yin Kone Pwint Magazine*) in June 1993.

In the mid-2000s, a well-known Mandalay writer Suu Nghat wrote a series of articles on Mandalay in the *Weekly Eleven journal*. The articles were reproduced as a book, *ālu-mi-ni-yan myeq-nba baw gá hīndhābādā poun-yeiq myà* (*Vermilion Images on the Aluminium Surface*), in 2011. The author appears to contrast between the modernity manifested in aluminium colour and the tradition symbolized in vermilion colour that Burmese used for the painting of royal palaces and other revered sites. The mixture of these two contrasts under the influence of Chinese migration, wealth and cultural encroachment has offered a distorted picture of Upper Burma.

Suu Nghat captured it well as follows: “[i]n changing globalized world, slow-moving Mandalay has undergone an experience of change as at least a ‘Yunnanized’ phase” (p. 99). He described a changing cultural scenario of Mandalay in the following passage:

[v]irtually no shops and workplaces are closed for religious holidays even for full-moon day. But except in one case. Chinese New year! During the Chinese New year, nothing can be sold and bought. Everything is stopped, silenced, and the cleared roads (p. 60).

Writers creatively invoke traditional proverbs, prophetic sayings, songs, images and other relevant symbols to bypass the censorship and get their messages across. For instance, Nyi Pu Lay wrote a short story about Chinese intrusion in Burma, which was published in *shwe ämyu-te meq-gäz̄in* in March 2011. The title of his story, *tă-i-i ä-nauq mba* (*Slowly Moving Westward*), is named after a well-known Burmese *täbaun* prophetic saying: *täyouq ká p'i shàn gá i sbí thí bāma ä-nauq mba* (When Chinese press down, Shans are sagging on Burmans. The Burmans are then forced to move westward).

Not only short story writers but also comedians raise their concern about Chinese domination in Burmese society. One of the most popular short plays (and also widely watched on the Internet), *mändälê-dhà siq-siq-cì ba bya!* (I am a Real Mandalay Native!), was a one-act performance of a famous comedian group from Mandalay. The play was performed in 2009 celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of Mandalay City. The main character of the play, a famous comedian Chit Saya, helped rural villagers who visit Mandalay for pilgrimage. He explains to the villagers about history, culture and the precise locations of all major sites in Mandalay. In the course of dialogues, he cracks several jokes about Chinese influence in the once royal city of Burma. For instance, when the visitors ask him whether two giant snakes on the top of Mandalay hill are alive, he responds, “[o]f course, they are not alive. If they were alive, they would have already be sold to the other side (i.e. China).” In another scene when he counts the names of all rich people from Mandalay’s various business sectors, all of them happen to be Chinese with the same family names. Though he demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of Mandalay, his dress and accent are apparently Chinese. In the end, the villagers ask him why he is so knowledgeable in spite of being a foreigner (i.e. Chinese). Then he becomes mad and proves to the villagers about his Burmese ancestry by showing the national ID. He says that he is a real native Mandalay resident but his style and accent has changed because he lives and works among the growing Chinese community, and has been forced to assimilate to the Chinese. He explains his assimilation experience by citing a Burmese proverb that goes: *mì myà mì nain ye myà ye nain* (If fire is in force, fire prevails and if water is in force, water prevails).

5.2 Post-2010 Pseudo-civilian Government: Political Backlash

As the new government led by the general-turned-civilian president Thein Sein has introduced unprecedented relaxation on censorship rules, private weekly journals that have already established a large readership and commercial viability are becoming more outspoken and daring in pushing the

boundaries of the state's restrictions. The Eleven Media Group, which publishes three weeklies and one bi-weekly journal, has come to play a crucial role in rallying public opinion. The speech given by the group's CEO Dr. Than Htut Aung in celebrating the 11th anniversary of the Eleven Media Group in January 2011 clearly highlighted the political, economic and social threats that Burma is facing from Chinese domination. He basically called for internal and external balancing against Chinese. He said, "[b]eing next door to the 21st century rising super-power, we will be doomed if we don't have internal strength." He noted that domestic economic growth, and reintegration in the international community (meaning the West and ASEAN) are essential for the country's survival. He also questioned how Burma will industrialize while its economy relies heavily on sales of natural resources (especially energy) to China and neighbouring countries. Than Htut Aung observed that China needs 20 million brides due to a gap in sexual ratio under communist one-child policy, and he warned that this demographic imbalance of a giant neighbour poses a social threat to Burma.

The actual sea-change in volume and intensity of public expressions regarding Chinese influence in Burma came with the controversy over *myiq-s'oun s'eb* (the Myitsone Dam) project. China's state-owned China Power Investment Corporation (CPI) started a multi-billion US-dollar project in 2006 to dam the Irrawaddy River at eight locations. The Myitsone dam, which is the largest of these dams with a planned reservoir area bigger than the size of Singapore, and which was being built just below the confluence of the Irrawaddy River, caused the greatest public outcry. Moreover, the Myitsone dam is located less than 100 km from a major tectonic fault line. Experts warn that an earthquake could cause the collapse of the dam, with devastating consequences.

When researchers, campaigners and independent media organizations started ringing alarm bells by citing the Chinese-funded Environmental Impact Assessment report, which called for the abandonment of the project or its replacement with two smaller dams upstream, the issue captured the national imagination and prompted a sense of public urgency to protect the Irrawaddy River. Calls to save the Irrawaddy were expressed through every conceivable medium: articles, cartoons, songs, petitions, public statements, religious sermons and interviews with experts. The undercurrent message of these expressions was, of course, critical of 'Chinese exploitation' and the Burmese military's collaboration.

In August, the government finally got around to defending the construction of the Myitsone dam in state-run newspapers, claiming that the project would have no negative impact on the flow of the Irrawaddy River or on the lives and livelihoods of local people. However, the private week-

lies, most notably the popular *Eleven Media* journal, pushed back and called for more transparency regarding the EIA, details of the MoU and dam construction-related information. The growing consensus among Burmese experts, including some senior advisers to the president, and general public was now clear: the project must be stopped, period.

The watershed moment came when Minister of Electric Power (1)⁷ Col Zaw Min, who claimed that “no one in Myanmar knows and possesses more experience than me concerning hydro-power,” told local media on September 11: “[r]egardless of objections from any sources, the construction of the Myitsone Hydropower Project will not be abolished. We will never rescind it” (*The New York Times* 2011). Zaw Min’s remarks triggered public outrage. The influential *Eleven Media* immediately responded by collecting the views of various leading journalists, public intellectuals and even members of the regime’s parliament. Highly respected veteran journalist Ludu Sein Win defiantly warned that people would take to the streets to defend the Irrawaddy River if civil and non-confrontational means didn’t work.

The president Thein Sein eventually made a partial concession to the public demand by announcing a temporary suspension of the project on September 30. However, the climax of public anger was reached when CPI President Lu Qizhou said the suspension of the project will “lead to a series of legal issues” (*Xinhua* 2011). Respected and veteran journalists, scholars, environmentalists and artists responded that Lu Qizhou’s threat was a “violation of sovereignty” (U Ohn, the most respected veteran environmentalist), “[t]hief shouts back the victims” (Maung Wuntha, a highly respected journalist). Some even called on China to “give compensation to Burma” (Kyaw Thu, a famous actor-turned-civil society leader).

Dozens of cartoons appeared in the weeklies and magazines. In one cartoon drawn by famous cartoonist Aw Pi Kyeh, an apparently Chinese-looking man drills the water pot from the bottom, and he rebuffs a poor Burmese woman who comes to drink the water. What the Chinese man says in the cartoon is: “Wait! Don’t drink yet. I will have to generate hydropower from this.”

The most interesting phenomena was that the Internet postings of those news reports, articles and cartoons drew hundreds of angry comments from readers within days. Social media and various public actions further disseminated and invigorated the momentum of the newly constructed public discourse on anti-Chinese sentiment. The comments on the web page of *Eleven Media* and other journals hosting online versions featured multiple

7 Ministry of Electric Power (1) is responsible for generating electrical power and Ministry of Electric Power (2) is responsible for distributing electricity.

back and forth interactions. They supported one another, developed intensity and eventually created an emboldened ‘imagined community.’

Meanwhile, two vastly popular publications have come out, specifically focused on the Irrawaddy issue with an anti-Chinese undercurrent. They are *pādaṅ pwin-dhiq meq-gāzīn* (*Padauk Pwint Thit Magazine*) published in June 2011, and *e-ya-wādi go dāw mā-hwān-jin ba* (*Don't Want to Miss The Irrawaddy!*) in September 2011. The former is one of the most influential monthly literature magazines. The June 2011 issue of the magazine was published with a dedication to the Irrawaddy River, and almost two-thirds of the writings covered deteriorating conditions of the river. The book *Don't Want to Miss The Irrawaddy!* is a collection of poems, songs, articles, photo essays, and reproductions of major news on the Irrawaddy River. The major themes in these publications are (a) ‘The Irrawaddy’ is being betrayed, and (b) ‘The Irrawaddy’ is crying all the way from its source, the Myitsone. The writings called for the salvation of ‘The Irrawaddy’ not in an abstract sense, but with the clear issue and targets. They vow to save the destruction of Myitsone, but in choosing their targets the writings display two different expressions: one group of writings appeals to the Burmese government to represent people’s voice, and the other implicitly attacks the regime as a traitor of the national interest. The articles often invoke a thematic line from the national anthem as we have seen it in Daw Amar’s writings: “[t]his (Burma) is our nation, this is our land, and we own it.”

The cultural and media expressions have also taken in many other forms, as there were art exhibitions, music performances, religious talks, and book sales regarding the ‘Save the Irrawaddy Movement’, all of which clearly demonstrate the anti-Chinese sentiment.

6 Conclusion

The descriptive narrative I have offered in this chapter indicates that there is an observable negative attitude among the people of Burma against the Chinese. One of the ways to measure it is to study contemporary cultural and media works. In my study, I was confined to the hard cases, which means the study of legally published or censored expressions. I excluded the underground works and Burmese broadcasts from foreign short-wave stations such as BBC, VOA, Radio Free Asia, Democratic Voice of Burma. All of them are nonetheless considerably influential in Burma.

My findings point out that the anti-Chinese sentiment has lasted since it began to be expressed in public medium in the mid and late 1980s. Thus, we can fairly conclude that the sentiment has come to form as an attitude, which is stickier than transient public opinion. The intensity of resentment

was already high in Upper Burma throughout late 1980s and 1990s. However, the recent public expressions concerning the issue of the Myitsone dam have put this negative attitude in the highest gear since 1969 when the anti-Chinese riot broke out in Burma. The negative attitude has also reached beyond Upper Burma, and now has been widely felt in the whole country thanks to the relaxation of media restrictions under the new government.

The findings may bear at least two key implications in Sino–Burma bilateral relations. First, my account shows that China is not an attractive state in the eyes of Burmese, especially since 1988. By employing Joseph Nye’s (Nye 2005) concept, we can fairly note that China does not possess sufficient soft power over people of Burma and consequently fails to generate goodwill among Burmese toward Chinese interests in Burma. In her political and economic engagements with Burma, Chinese tend to over-rely on the power-that-be to gain what they want, and underestimate increasing resentment and spontaneous resistance of general population.

Second, the coincidence of timing between growing anti-Chinese sentiment and Burma’s on-going political transition could be a cause of a serious concern for emergence of populist nationalism in Burma. In early phase of democratization or anticipation of democratization in the context of weak institutions, the conditions that are now all present in Burma such as widespread poverty, unadaptable elites’ interests (some key stakeholders feel threatened financially and politically), and increasing level of freedom of speech could slide the country into populism and nationalistic violence: anti-Chinese riots (Snyder 2000).

Anti-Chinese populism has to be tempered and constrained by all parties concerned. Otherwise, confusion and unpredictability of domestic politics in Burma can invite more visible Chinese interference in Burma because China will be fear of losing her vested interests in Burma. Moreover, if extra-regional powers such as United States enter into this picture and (in Chinese perception) complicate Sino–Burma relations by using the latter to balance against or encircle China, Beijing could even feel classical “security dilemma.” In a worst case scenario, China could resort to reactivation of Sino–Burma border-based ethnic conflicts in Burma as a way to press Naypyidaw to realign the conditions with Beijing’s interest. It will severely undermine Burma’s state-building effort and much-needed development.

Some critics may object to me using contemporary cultural and media works as measures to describe the attitude of the Burmese people. They may argue that producers of culture and public opinion are still elites, and do not represent the general public’s attitude. My response tends to reflect a dilemma of those who conduct Burma-related research. While we Burma researchers have many significant research questions to investigate, our data

for understanding these puzzles are scarce and rather crude. However, the limited data should not cause us to abandon our research works. I have modestly attempted what I could conduct within the limits, and will attempt to improve my research design over time. I welcome other researchers to come up with more accurate methods such as longitudinal survey data to measure the attitude of Burmese people toward Chinese.

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