

# ***Life in the Border Gap: A Study on the Identity and Survival Practices of Burmese Migrant Workers in the China-Myanmar Border Area -Taking Three Burmese Migrant Workers in Ruili City as Examples***

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**Abstract.** In recent years, the economy in the border area between China and Myanmar has developed rapidly, attracting a large number of Myanmar workers to continuously pour into Yunnan Province, China. This study takes three Myanmar workers in Ruili City as cases and uses the in-depth interview method to systematically explore their living conditions, identity recognition, and adaptation strategies in China. The research results show that the Myanmar workers mainly engage in low-skilled jobs in the secondary labor market and face multiple challenges such as language barriers, insufficient legal rights protection, and limited social integration. Although they exhibit characteristics of cultural integration between China and Myanmar and have adapted to local life to a certain extent, their identity predicament and institutional restrictions still significantly affect their long-term development and cross-border mobility. This study aims to reveal the real survival picture of Myanmar workers in the border gap, provide empirical evidence for policy formulation, and promote further attention to the rights protection and social integration issues of cross-border labor groups.

**Keywords:** China-Myanmar border, Myanmar migrant workers, identity recognition, survival practice, cross-border movement

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, the rapid economic development in the border area between China and Myanmar has attracted a large number of Burmese workers to continuously pour into Yunnan Province, China. Compared with the Burmese cities bordering Ruili, Ruili has a more developed economy, stable wage income and large employment demand with the support of the state. At the same time, Ruili's enterprises are willing to employ Burmese workers who are cheaper and can work hard [1]. As a unique cross-border labor group in this region, these Burmese workers have become an important force driving the economic construction and social development of the local area. This study, through in-depth interviews, focuses on the survival status and real situation of this group in China, aiming to deeply reveal the life picture, challenges and adaptation strategies they present during the cross-border movement. The significance of this research lies in systematically analyzing the

survival status of Burmese workers in the border areas of China and the complex structural mechanisms behind it, providing empirical evidence for the formulation of relevant labor and social policies.

## 2. Literature review

Burma laborers usually refer to those who hold Burmese nationality and exist in China as cross-border workers or border laborers. Generally, they are Burmese laborers who leave Burma for economic purposes and enter other countries or regions to engage in temporary or low-skilled work.

Nowadays, from the perspective of the industries where Burmese workers are employed, they are mainly concentrated in the secondary labor market dominated by the secondary and tertiary industries. The specific occupations of Burmese workers in China include dishwashers and hotel waiters [2]. They are mainly engaged in industries such as trade, jewelry processing and sales, wood processing, construction, catering, entertainment, loading and unloading, car washing, and housekeeping. Most of their works are characterized by being single, simple, and highly repetitive. Due to their generally low level of education and the lack of professional and technical training, they are mainly concentrated in the heavy manual labor industries and the service sectors with low technical requirements. As a result, their wage level remains low [3].

Moreover, from a spatial perspective, the living environment and space of employees from Myanmar are also greatly restricted. The living space of Burmese workers is confined to a very small range and they face the heavy pressure of work [2]. Apart from that, the exclusion from social culture and the “stigma” of their own identity make their life outside of work filled with risks and uncertainties [2]. These factors lead to the less than ideal living conditions for Myanmar workers. The state precisely controls cross-border flows through differentiated and orderly practices. In the tourism sector, this is manifested in the distinction between tourists and gamblers, while in the labor market, it is reflected in the restrictions on the scope and space of employment for Burmese workers [4].

Identity recognition is the awareness of the commonality of the group one belongs to and the differences from other groups. It has social attributes and integrative qualities [5]. It is not only reflected in nationality. But also reflect in the ability to communicate with the local citizens, the type of work they do, and the social acceptance. The same Burmese workers have a special status. They belong to unconventional labor and are more likely to face restrictions or unfair treatment. As Zhou's study states, ethnic Burmese workers are often regarded as "outsiders" in the border society, facing institutional exclusion and social-cultural marginalization [6]. This identity predicament has affected their social integration and rights protection. Here are three major reasons: First of all, the average education level of Myanmar workers is low, and there is a shortage of high-quality skilled talents [7]. Secondly, language barriers limit the job preferences of Burmese workers to engage in some 'low language, de-skilled' manual labor [2]. Thirdly, the legal rights awareness of Myanmar migrant workers is weak, and some individuals have not even completed the legal procedures for working abroad, making it impossible to arrange for relevant insurance. And they are unable to purchase medical insurance, leading to difficulties in seeking medical treatment when ill. In the event of labor disputes, there are no channels for complaints, and they cannot safeguard their legal rights [7]. These factors led them to belong to the category of local disadvantaged groups.

This study uses the in-depth interview method, a qualitative research method, to explore in-depth the complex issues of Myanmar workers' life experience, work conditions, cultural adaptation, and identity in Ruili, China. This method is suitable for obtaining detailed individualized and

contextualized narratives and can effectively capture the interviewees' true feelings and subjective experiences.

### 3. Research method

This study adopts a qualitative research method (in-depth interviews), which is suitable for exploring the complex and individualized life experience of labor groups. Interviewees included a general manager of a Chinese garment factory, a Burmese garment factory employee, and a hotel waiter. Interviews were conducted through a combination of factory-based interviews and random street interviews. The interview questions mainly covered the following dimensions: In terms of basic situation and employment background, questions were asked about place of origin, motivation for coming to China, impact of civil war, type of work, contract, and salary benefits. The interviewees generally said that they came to China for economic reasons and to escape the war and were engaged in basic work. The salary was concentrated between 2,500 and 3,500 yuan, and the contract was for half a year. None of them had suffered wage arrears. In terms of living conditions and social integration, questions involved housing, diet, medical care, language adaptation, community participation, and perception of discrimination. Most of them reflected that they lived in local work dormitories provided by their employers and adapted to local life, but there were generally language barriers in communicating with local people. They had good relationships with local people but had deep-seated social difficulties and spent their leisure time mainly shopping.

In terms of legal rights and cultural identity, the focus was on the legality of documents, awareness of rights, degree of legal popularization, preservation of cultural customs, and participation in festivals. The interviewees all held legal documents but had inconveniences caused by frequent renewals, had limited understanding of Chinese laws, celebrated both Chinese and Burmese festivals culturally, and clearly identified themselves as "Myanmar workers." In terms of future expectations, most people expressed a desire to stay in China, hoping to obtain more job opportunities or simplify entry and exit procedures. They generally do not have long-term plans, and their personal plans tend to be pragmatic.

This study adopted thematic analysis to systematically code and categorize interview recordings and text records, extracting recurring and representative themes and keywords, such as "economic drive and escape from war," "language barriers and social limitations," "document troubles and cross-border inconveniences," "China-Myanmar cultural integration," and "short-term livelihood orientation." At the same time, exceptions were also noted. For example, garment factory employees, as management personnel, have better salaries and communication conditions but also face cross-border travel difficulties, reflecting the high degree of commonality in the situations of respondents from the same region and individual differences due to their positions.

At last, the research process adhered to ethical standards, avoiding politically sensitive topics. All video and audio recordings were anonymized, and the faces of interviewees were concealed to ensure their privacy and rights were not infringed. Through these measures, this study strived to truthfully and objectively reflect the realities of Burmese workers in China while respecting the interviewees.

## 4. Empirical analysis

### 4.1. Livelihood forms and occupational stratification in border economy

The study pointed out that the ethnic Burmese workers at the China-Myanmar border mostly engage in informal and low-skilled jobs, such as trade assistance, service industries, and manual labor. Their employment is highly unstable and temporary [6]. According to Zhou's study, in the workplace, there are very few individuals engaged in high-level management [5].

Similarly, in in-depth interviews, Myanmar workers generally lack plans or response mechanisms for the future; they primarily focus on their current lives and daily entertainment activities such as smoking and drinking. However, despite the language barrier in the local area, a small number of Burmese employees, such as Burmese immigrants in Chinese massage parlors, have learned to recite professional terms related to massage, improve basic Chinese listening and speaking skills through multilingual databases, and use interactive resources to improve their ability to communicate with Chinese customers [8].

The problem is that there are still a lot of Burmese workers moving disorderly in the border areas. Some Burmese workers can only enter the local area through private channels to work because they are unable to pay the high cost of handling temporary residence permits, work permits, and other related certificates [3]. At the same time, according to taste-based discrimination theory, employers dislike certain social groups because of assumed or actual characteristics that are not related to productivity, like gambling and alcoholism [9]. It also makes it harder for them to get jobs. In order to cope with the social unrest caused by excessive local foreign workers, the state precisely controls cross-border flows through differentiated and orderly practices. In the labor market, it is reflected in the restrictions on the scope and space of employment for Burmese workers [4].

### 4.2. The transformation path of language ability and social capital

The interview report shows that the fluency of Chinese determines whether Myanmar employees have the opportunity of upward promotion. From the interview, the author learned that in the factory, the employees are divided into several working groups, and the leadership mainly communicates with the group leader to understand the assembly line production situation of different employees through the group leader. Because the management basically does not have the ability to communicate directly with employees. There are basically two ways for local Myanmar employees to be employed: First are the employment agencies. The intermediary is responsible for entrusting Burmese workers who go through the process to handle certificates and introduce a job and charge different fees according to the type and quality of work introduced. The agencies usually employ 5-6 translators, mainly overseas Chinese or Burmese workers with better Chinese language skills. Translation is a high-tech occupation among Burmese workers, and the monthly salary can reach 5000-6000 yuan, which is 4-5 times that of other ordinary Burmese workers [3]. This shows that the Chinese level mentioned above affects the income level of local Burmese employees. Some employees find jobs through intermediaries. Another is that many Burmese workers choose acquaintances they know as intermediaries. They do not take this as a profession but provide help out of "human relations" [3].

### 4.3. Survival strategies in daily practice

Chinese actors have emphasized the role of economic cooperation zones and border trade in boosting peace and stability. It enables easy access and defines the legality of particular, selected flows of people and goods in crossing the border [10]. In dealing with the management of foreign employees, R city established and improved the service and Management Center for foreign personnel and provided "one-stop" services for foreign personnel employed in accordance with the procedures of "translation of documents-information collection-physical examination-work certificates-residence certificates." Strengthen the supervision responsibility of the main body of the employment of foreign personnel [3].

With the increase of floating population in border areas, the management policy on foreign personnel is also constantly improving, and Myanmar workers will be more and more affected by the policy in the process of working. For example, in terms of the prescribed time limit for endorsement procedures, the new policy shortens the endorsement period from 5-7 days [3]. Although such a system effectively controls and manages personnel, it has negative effects. For example, during the epidemic period, China's direct blockade of the border and repatriation of Burmese employees in Ruili City brought great unrest and economic instability to the local foreign employees. And according to the different international situations, the control of the entry of personnel is very strict, bringing a lot of trouble for the labor to enter the country for work.

### 4.4. Cultural identity and future ideas

Although Burmese workers have retained certain home country habits, living on the border for a long time has also prompted them to develop cross-cultural adaptation strategies and form a "border identity" [6]. For Burmese workers in Ruili, cultural identity is not a simple choice but a mixed "borderland identity" between Chinese and Burmese cultures formed in the practice of daily life. In terms of the preservation and integration of cultural customs, respondents generally adopted a "public-private" strategy. In the private sector and fellow communities, they stubbornly retain the cultural imprint of their home country. As one interviewee said: "We usually like to eat Burmese food and speak Burmese with our friends. During the Thingyan Festival, several of our fellow villagers will cook and celebrate together, which is our happiest day in a foreign country."

However, in the public sphere and workplace, they show a high degree of adaptability and willingness to learn Chinese culture. Celebrating Chinese festivals (e.g., the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival) has become a necessary social activity and a way to obtain social recognition to some extent. A Chinese manager confirmed this: "They (Burmese employees) are willing to integrate. They will learn to make dumplings during the Spring Festival, which is more like the wisdom of 'do as the Romans do' than deep-seated cultural identity." This cultural "dual track parallel" mode highlights the pragmatism tendency it identifies with. Cultural integration is a necessary means of survival and development, while cultural preservation is the core of maintaining emotional belonging and spiritual comfort. With regard to future ideas, the vast majority of respondents' planning showed a clear short-term and livelihood orientation. Their vision is very pragmatic, which is restricted by multiple factors such as the convenience of cross-border procedures, the stability of economic income, and the change of the situation in Myanmar. When asked about future plans, a typical response is: "I didn't think too far. Now I just hope to earn more money and send it home. If I can always have a job and it's not so troublesome to apply for a visa, I'm willing to stay. As for staying in China for a long time? I don't dare think so. It's too difficult." This mentality of "taking one step at a time" is rooted in the fuzziness and instability of its



institutional identity. Frequent visa renewals, a strict work permit system, and the inability to enjoy the same social security as local residents make it difficult for them to form a long-term sense of belonging and security in China. Their focus of life has always been on their hometown in Myanmar. Their time in China is regarded as a "journey" to accumulate economic capital for their families, rather than a permanent "settlement."

Chinese ability plays a key role in this process, which directly affects the confidence and imagination of workers in the future. Fluent speakers (such as the Burmese employee in a management position) are more likely to envisage an upward social mobility path and express a stronger willingness to stay in China. Those with limited language ability are confined to isolated social and work circles, and their future planning is more limited to short-term and repetitive physical labor, lacking the possibility of long-term development.

To sum up, the cultural identity of Burmese workers in Ruili is a highly situational mixed identity generated in the cracks of the border. Their expectations for the future are not based on profound cultural affiliation or identity change, but on extremely realistic short-term livelihood strategies jointly shaped by economic rationality and institutional constraints.

## 5. Conclusion

Through in-depth interviews with three Burmese workers in Ruili City, this study reveals their living conditions and identity problems in the cracks between China and Myanmar. The main conclusions are as follows: (1) Burmese workers are mainly engaged in unstable and low-skilled informal work, and their career development space is very limited. Their income and living standards are generally low, and they lack long-term planning for the future, mainly aiming at short-term economic income. (2) language ability is the key factor affecting their survival and development. People who are fluent in Chinese are more likely to get higher-paid jobs such as management positions or translation, while people with poor language skills are restricted to isolated manual labor circles and have difficulty moving upward. (3) although China's border management system regulates the employment of foreigners, it also brings them a lot of inconvenience, such as frequent renewal of certificates and limited employment space. These systems have strengthened their identity as "temporary passers-by," making it difficult for them to obtain a sense of belonging and security in China. (4) In terms of cultural identity, they adopted a practical strategy of "separating public from private": to retain Myanmar cultural habits in private circles and to learn to adapt to Chinese culture at work and in public places. This "border mixed identity" is for better survival, rather than real cultural identity. (5) most people's expectations for the future are short-term and pragmatic. They are more concerned about how to make more money and simplify entry and exit procedures than staying in China for a long time. Their focus of life is still in Myanmar, and their work in China is more like a "journey" to accumulate economic capital for families than a "settlement."

Limitations remain that the sample size of this study is small, mainly focusing on Ruili City, and it may not represent the situation of all Burmese workers. Future research can expand the scope of the survey and include more samples from different industries and regions; a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can be employed to comprehensively analyze the structural factors that affect their living conditions. In addition, how cross-border workers use digital media and social networks to improve their lives is also a direction worthy of further discussion.

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