

Bottom-up Coexistence : The Negotiation of Chinese Ethnicity, Islam, and the Making of Ethno-Religious Landscapes among Yunnanese Muslims in the Thai-Myanmar Borderland

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Bottom-up Coexistence: The Negotiation of Chinese Ethnicity, Islam, and the Making of Ethno-Religious Landscapes among Yunnanese Muslims in the Thai-Myanmar Borderland

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1. Introduction

Minority and immigrant peoples frequently find themselves placed in marginal positions in nation-states, and there is a tendency for attention to be given to aspects of distress and aberration in the historical process of movement across borders. In recent years, the need for a reconsideration of the one-dimensional view of immigrants by the state has arisen, and as seen in transnationalism and diaspora studies, rather than interest having grown in a “bird’s-eye” view of the state, it has instead grown in the kind of collectivity and cultural creativity that is brought about by two-way communication between the country of origin and the country of immigration, with immigrants playing a central role (Cohen 2008). Based on this trend, this paper offers a critical treatment of the state approach of institutional integration and assimilation and of the approach of the center-periphery to the movement of people across international borders¹). Here, the redrawing of socio-cultural boundaries (Barth ed. 1969; Erikson 2004 [1966]) between immigrants and others and the micro-negotiations of social bonds is conceptualized as “bottom-up coexistence,” (Wang 2014) and the nature of the formation of ethno-religious boundaries is examined as seen from the viewpoint of those who have experienced trans-regional migration²). Special attention will be paid to the construction of the Yunnanese Chinese Muslim society’s religious network in northern Thailand and their religious events (Fig. 1).

2. Yunnanese Muslims in Northern Thailand: A Multilayered History of Migration

Yunnanese Muslims are one of the ethnic groups called Hui in China that adhere to Islam. They have a unique historical and religious heritage. The Yunnanese Muslims living in Northern Thailand formed communities in stages, from the end of the nineteenth century to the latter half of the twentieth century, through different waves of migration and for different reasons. Moreover, their migrant communities have a multi-layered

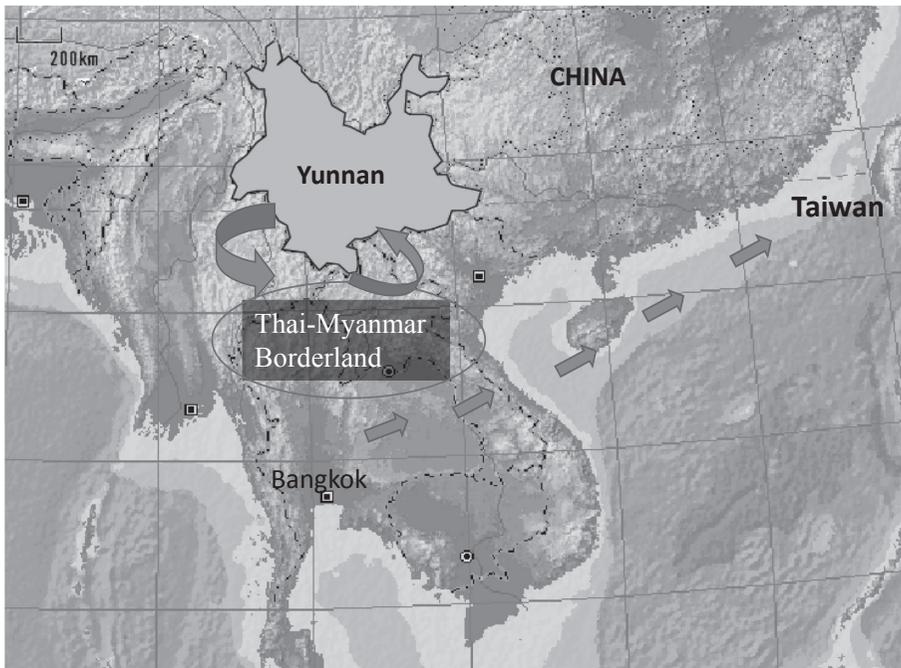


Figure 1 Map of Northern Thailand

history as a result of constant contact with other ethnic groups. In the following, a chronological summary of the Yunnanese Muslims' settlement in Northern Thailand, including their passage through Burma (Myanmar), is given based on major milestones in this history.

Firstly, Hui Muslims originating from Yunnan came to have a large influence on Thai society as a result of interregional trade between China and Southeast Asia, which gained momentum in the late nineteenth century. Following colonization in Burma and Indochina by the Western powers of England and France, Yunnan's roads drew attention as they provided a shortcut to mainland China. Yunnanese Muslims formed caravans of horses and mules and carried commercial goods both inside and outside China, Burma, Laos, and Thailand. As the Yunnanese Muslims made their fortune from trade, some settled in Thailand. By the end of the nineteenth century, they had formed an embryonic community. In 1917, a Yunnanese Muslim assumed the position of imam, a religious leader, in the city of Chiang Mai, and a mosque administered primarily by the Yunnanese Muslims, the Ban Ho Mosque, was built. Thus, it was interregional trade between Yunnan and Thailand that led to the first group of Yunnanese Muslims settling in Northern Thailand from the end of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, in the period called the first wave of Yunnanese Muslim migration (Hill 1998, Suchart 2010, Suthep 2013, Wang 2011).

Before and after this first wave of migration, the defeat of Du Wenxiu, a Hui from

Dali, by the Qing Dynasty in 1872 led to Muslim migration from Yunnan. Du's troops and progenies fled to Burma and formed a community in Wa states in 1875 (Forbes 1986). Amassing a fortune from trade in Burma, they were then dispersed as the British colonized Burma and the Japanese military advanced into the country, causing their village society to collapse. Besides referring to themselves as Muslims, they also refer to themselves as the Panglong people, after the area in Burma in which they settled. Their descendants are found across Burma today. In addition, they had also migrated to Northern Thailand and Taiwan (Kimura 2016, Wang-Kanda 2016). Although there were several waves of migration from Burma to Thailand, the Yunnanese Muslims who first settled in Burma and then migrated to Thailand are called second-wave migrants.

The third wave of migration started from the second half of the twentieth century. In contrast to the first and second waves of migrations, in which only small numbers of Yunnanese Muslims took part, the third wave involved a mass migration. The major reason for migration was disorder and political instability brought about by the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. As a result, large numbers of refugees flowed from China to Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Included among them were Yunnanese Muslims, some of whom settled in Northern Thailand. Many refugee villages sprung up along the borders of Northern Thailand and Burma, including those built by the Yunnanese Muslims as bases of livelihood (Wang 2011).

Furthermore, what should be remembered is that the society they built has a multi-layered history resulting from constant contact with other ethnic groups. During the first-wave migration period, South Asian Muslims were already settled in Thailand by the time the Yunnanese Muslims settled in the country at the end of the nineteenth century. In the same period, South Asian Muslims developed textile and meat trade in Northern Thailand. The Yunnanese Muslims formed budding religious networks with them during their initial process of settling in the country. This is evidenced by the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century, both groups had already jointly established a mosque in Northern Thailand (Wang 2014).

When the second wave of Yunnanese Muslim migrants settled in Burma, they developed inter-ethnic relations with the Wa people of northern Burma. The land in Burma that was settled by the Yunnanese Muslims from Dali at the end of the nineteenth century was originally under Wa control. While the Yunnanese Muslims and the northern Burmese Wa people fought repeatedly, they also forged strategic marriage alliances between them to develop an immigrant society (Forbes 1988). Family trees of the Yunnanese Muslims in Northern Thailand include relatives produced from such strategic marriages with the Wa people. This shows that relations between the two peoples cannot be ignored when studying the development of Yunnanese Muslim migration. The migration history of the Yunnanese Muslims cannot be understood if they are examined in isolation from other ethnic groups.

The third wave involved the migration of refugees due to civil war and social unrest in China, beginning around 1949. In this year, the Communist Party of China won the civil war, establishing the People's Republic of China. Before and after this event, civil war laid waste to mainland China, destabilizing society. An anxious populace fled to

countries like Burma over land from China. During this time, diverse groups of people other than Muslims also emigrated from Yunnan. Ethnic groups who influenced the trans-border movement of the Yunnanese Muslims and their settlement include the Han people, as well as other ethnic groups such as the Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Yao, and Mon who practiced mountainous swidden agriculture.

3. Life Hardship as Refugees: Since the 1950s

3.1 Suffering in the process of migration

Among the abovementioned waves of migration, the third wave greatly influenced the formation of the Yunnanese Muslim community in Thailand. When the Yunnanese Muslims escaped from China to Thailand, passing through Burma, a part of the defeated Nationalist Army (Kuomintang [KMT]) also escaped to the Thai-Burmese borderlands. It was estimated that there were only about 1,500 KMT soldiers left when they fled Yunnan³⁾. However, in Burma, the KMT tried to expand their military forces there with support from the US. KMT forces recruited large numbers of civilian refugees, including Yunnanese Muslims, who had escaped from Yunnan mostly in the same period. As merchants, the Yunnanese Muslims travelled across mountainous areas. Due to the military impact of the civil war and Cold War under the prevailing international conditions, the characteristics of border-crossing also changed. Migratory routes became much more diversified than before. Some of the Yunnanese Muslims were trapped by the KMT military movement, and some tried to escape from Burma by passing through Laos and later re-entering Thailand.

Of particular note are the Yunnanese Muslims' cross-border experiences and their relations with the KMT. The KMT actively utilized the Yunnanese Muslim population. The Yunnanese Muslims were forced to transport KMT military supplies across the Burmese-Thai border because, as mentioned above, the Yunnanese Muslim traders, from the time when they lived in China, were adept at caravan trade using horses and mules and had experience in transporting goods along steep mountain paths and moving between hills and cities.

Some Yunnanese Muslims were also conscripted as KMT soldiers, a number of them becoming military leaders. For example, the case of Mr. Li, a Yunnanese Muslim in his 40s residing in one of the refugee villages, Mae Salong in Chiang Rai Province, was inducted into KMT military activities in Thailand. Mr. Li's father, who originated from Jinghong in Xi Shuang Ban Na in Yunnan Province, left Yunnan around 1949 to escape the political turmoil. Later, in the 1950s, he joined a Yunnanese Muslim-led KMT unit in Burma and thereafter acted as a KMT army leader in the refugee villages, taking charge of trade and military activities. Another example is that of the Yunnanese Muslim Mr. Ma, a former resident of the refugee village of Ban Yang in Chiang Mai Province, who escaped with his wife from Yunnan Province to a refugee camp in Thailand in the 1960s. The reason for their migration was that Mr. Ma was afraid of the Chinese administration during the Great Cultural Revolution and wished to visit his father, who was with the KMT army in Thailand, with the intention of building a new home there. Mr. Ma's father

had been an officer in the KMT army, and thus there is also the background that Mr. Ma, in respect for his father's wishes, formed an association of KMT army civilian personnel in the refugee village (Wang 2011).

3.2 Marginalization by the Thai government

Along with their relationship with the KMT army, the Yunnanese Muslims also faced hardship after settling in Thailand. According to interviews conducted in 1998, more than 80,000 Han Chinese and 10,000 Muslims were living in the north of the country. It is estimated that more than 90 refugee villages were built along the northern Thai borderlands. Of the 36 villages I visited, more than 22 were Han Chinese and only 14 were Muslim. Of the 14 Muslim villages, seven were a mixture of Han and Muslim.

What should be noted is that the Thai government tried to control the Yunnanese Muslims from the perspective of national security rather than for ethno-religious reasons. For the Thai government, the biggest problem during the Cold War was to control the KMT military and also to protect Thailand from the communist guerillas along the northern Thai borderlands. As a result, both the Han and Hui Yunnanese were confined in refugee villages under the control of the Thai government. As illegal residents, they were forbidden from traveling freely within the country and were conditionally authorized to travel outside the administrative region in which they lived only if they submitted a written request. Also, their economic activities were restricted. In the past, although informants divulged few details, many had few economic options other than to trade with opium farmers among the mountain hill dwellers. However, after their settlement in Thailand, they were forced to transform their economic activities to act as middlemen dealing in opium. Moreover, the Thai government utilized the KMT's military power to combat communist guerillas along the borders with Laos and Burma. The KMT's contribution to fighting the communists led to the granting of Thai citizenship to KMT soldiers only; the Yunnanese civilian Muslims remained refugees (Wang 2006; 2011).

Thus we can see that the Yunnanese Muslims were marginalized both politically and economically in Thailand. Moreover, their socio-political situation deteriorated below that of the KMT soldiers, most of whom were Han.

4. Islam as a Social Safety Net

4.1 Mosques as ethnic markers

As seen in the above, the migratory experiences of the Yunnanese Muslims in the mid-twentieth century were harsh and unstable. After the refugee villages were formed in the mountainous Thai borderlands at this time, some Yunnanese Muslims moved to urban areas such as Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, while new arrivals settled in the refugee villages. As the Yunnanese Muslims settled in Thailand, they sought to strengthen ties among themselves and coexist with others, using a flexible and multifaceted network.

Mosques are the primary sites for intra-ethnic networks to develop. The network among the Yunnanese Muslims became salient through the construction or rebuilding of mosques. In Chiang Mai Province, for example, there were only three mosques in the

first half of the twentieth century. Of these, the Yunnanese Muslims administered and worshipped only at the Ban Ho mosque, which was built by Zheng Cong Lin in 1917. As more Yunnanese Muslims fled their homeland and settled in Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century, by 1966 the number of worshippers began to overwhelm the Ban Ho mosque. Zheng and other wealthy Yunnanese Muslims therefore donated money to reconstruct the mosque, which appears to have been built originally with wood. The rebuilt, mostly white mosque was constructed with concrete and turned into a beautiful two-story structure.

While migrants from Yunnan attended the mosques in the city of Chiang Mai, residents in refugee villages began to construct their own mosques. According to 1998 data, 13 mosques were registered in Chiang Mai Province, of which five were located in refugee villages. A mosque was built by the Yunnanese Muslims in the Tathon District in 1974, in the Fang District in 1975, in Huofai Village in 1985, in Ban Yang Village from 1970 through to around 1980, and in Angkhan in 1987. As for the Yunnanese Muslims settled in Chiang Rai Province, for example, a mosque with a thatched roof was built as early as 1960, shortly after they migrated to Thailand as refugees. As they continued to settle there, many began to call for restoration of the mosque, and a two-story concrete mosque was built in 1989. Funding to cover the construction costs—two million baht—was collected from influential Yunnanese Muslim military officers living in the village and Yunnanese Muslims living in other villages. In those days, the overwhelming majority of Han Chinese and Muslims, who lived in the refugee villages, belonged to the KMT military force. Since almost no Yunnanese Muslims with a military background had religious expertise, Yunnanese Muslims who lived in Chiang Mai were invited from the 1960s to serve as imams at the mosques. This tradition has lasted for decades and has been passed on to succeeding generations.

4.2 Food

The character of the mosques reflects ethnic elements of Chinese-ness. Firstly, the imam is generally a Yunnanese Muslim. Secondly, their mosques have not only Arabic and Thai names, but also a Chinese name. For example, in the case of the Ban Ho mosque, the names are as follows. Ban Ho is the Thai name, meaning the village of the Ho people. Ho implies Yunnanese Muslims. The Arabic name is *Hidāya al-Islām*, meaning guide to Islam. In Chinese, the mosque is called Wang He Qing Zhen Si (王和清真寺), meaning “glory and peace.” Thirdly, the Yunnanese dialect of Chinese is used in their mosques and communities. The Arabic language is used for religious prayer, but everyday conversation is not only in Thai, but also in Chinese, especially for the first generation. Besides the use of language, another firmly rooted heritage of the people is their food culture.

As the Yunnanese Muslims become assimilated into Thai society, the opportunity for them to eat Thai cuisine is certainly no longer rare. However, the dietary habits of the Thai people, the overwhelming majority of whom are Buddhists, do not conform to the dietary norms that Muslims are prescribed to keep. Conformity with Islamic law is emphasized by Muslims’ dietary practices. In other words, Muslims are required by

Islamic law to consume halal foods. In Arabic, the concept of “halal” stands in opposition to “haram.” Under Islamic law, each human action belongs to one of five legal categories: obligatory, recommended, disapproved but not unlawful, forbidden, and permitted. Haram represents actions that are forbidden. Here, forbidden conduct is an action that God has commanded human beings not to carry out. As the opposite of haram, halal denotes things that are permitted.

It is a well-known halal norm that Muslims are forbidden to eat pork. An animal other than the pig may be eaten if it is slaughtered by slitting its carotid artery while reciting “Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim” (“in the name of God,” “God is great”) and letting the blood drain from its body. In this way the animal becomes a halal food. Moreover, a variety of other regulations and approved standards are laid down in detail in Islamic law and also by Muslims in each region. What is critical for Muslims regarding halal norms is the belief in God, the last day, and the world to come. Practicing halal does not mean just eating certain food items. It is an expression of the belief that what is ultimate is God and eschatology. It is belief in God and having the strong desire of going to heaven in the next world. Thus, it is a basic stance for Muslims to practice self-control in consuming foods that are not haram and to engage in halal conduct.

In China, halal foods are called “*qing zhen*” (清真) foods. Some interpretations of this term include the meanings of pure and clean (Gladney 1991). These interpretations of halal practices include not only the dogmatic meaning of conduct in accordance with Islamic law and, underlying it, Muslim eschatological beliefs, but also flexibly the meaning added by people about foods in their lives. Of the halal foods passed down by the Yunnanese Muslims at both family and community level, items with especially local color include 牛干巴 (*niu gan ba*; dried beef), 油香 (*you xiang*; a cookie-like snack made of wheat), and 巴巴絲 (*ba ba si*; a type of rice noodle) (Photos 1, 2, 3). These are foods that the Yunnanese Muslims prepare for communal meal rituals in the home or mosque.

Also, in Yunnanese Muslim communities, 請客 (*qing ke*; inviting a guest), 做客 (*zuo ke*; being a guest for a meal), and visiting without turning down an invitation are important to the smooth functioning of social life. While it is well known that the Han people seek to create harmonious human relationships by gathering around a round table, Chinese Muslims also have the custom of inviting guests and sharing a meal around a round table. In keeping with their cultural traditions around food, Yunnanese Muslims living in a different country—Thailand in this case—maintain a communal body of faith and human connections through face-to-face communal meals. This characteristic can be seen in various arenas, from the home to the mosque, in connecting the Islamic calendar with rituals in life. At the home level, beef rice noodle is eaten in the morning of the first day of the fast-breaking celebration. This celebration is considered a part of the Yunnanese Muslims’ New Year celebration. They eat New Year’s beef noodles and relatives gather to join in this feast.

Above all, striking examples of communal meals can be seen in the mosque. The Yunnanese Muslims perform rituals of life in their mosques, including religious ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. During such events, communal meals, overflowing with halal foods, are partaken. Furthermore, many cultures are woven exquisitely in the



Photo 1 Traditional Chinese Halal food called “*niu gan ba*” (牛干巴).



Photo 2 Traditional Chinese Halal food called “*you xiang*” (油香).

Yunnanese Muslims’ traditional foods, and the shape of the Muslim community under multicultural conditions is vividly reflected in their foods. The dishes express a hybridity distinctive from migrant culture. As an example, this characteristic can be seen in the menu of a communal feast celebrated after the end of fasting (*Ramadan*). This feast is a ritual in the Yunnanese Muslims’ practice of Islam. What is extremely interesting is, in addition to Yunnanese Muslim foods, mixed into the menu are South Asian dishes and

Thai dishes (Photo 4). Curry with potatoes and ginger, said to be an almost indispensable part of the meal, appears on the table. This dish, called *kaen nuea* in Thai, is not a Chinese dish but rather an original dish of South Asian Muslims. Its ingredients are completely different from the Thai dish of the same name. The Thai dish is made with stir-fried cellophane noodles called *phat wun sen*. Usually a South Asian curry dish is placed as the main dish in the middle of Chinese dishes lined up on the table for the



Photo 3 Traditional Chinese noodle with beef called 巴巴絲 (*ba ba si*) served on the morning of the “*‘Id al-Fitr*” ritual.



Photo 4 Local Chinese, Indian, and Thai style food served at a Chinese mosque during Ramadan.

ceremony. It is unlikely such a dish would be served in their home villages in China, and it has transformed the food culture of the Yunnanese Muslims who left China and migrated to Thai cities.

4.3 Relations with non-Chinese Muslims

The construction of Chinese mosques helped to strengthen the network among the Yunnanese Muslims. A mosque, where each individual interacts directly with God, also plays the social function of helping to build ties among Muslims. The Yunnanese Muslims gathering at a mosque are often linked by kinship and some Muslims therefore travel to a distant mosque to maintain their network with relatives. Some people travel by motorcycle or car to distant mosques every Friday. While they usually pray at their homes, women go to mosques on Fridays for the purpose of getting together with acquaintances, friends, and relatives. Mosques therefore serve as a node that strengthens bonds among the Yunnanese Muslims.

Moreover, the intra-ethnic network of the Yunnanese Muslims also promotes the religion of Islam and bolsters inter-ethnic relationships. The leading example is the activities of Hu Ran Mo, a first-generation Yunnanese Muslim migrant, who founded the first Islamic school in northern Thailand. Hu Ran Mo left Communist China in the mid-twentieth century and arrived in Thailand via Burma. Like many other Yunnanese Muslims, he travelled between mountains and plains while engaging in caravan trade in opium and other goods. He settled in Chiang Mai as a refugee in 1951. Hu used the proceeds from his trade to found the school in 1972. The school was also the first religious school in northern Thailand. It is called Masjid al-Taqwā, or Jingzhen (敬真) School in Chinese. The necessary funds were raised by Hu and other Yunnanese Muslims, and also included donations from Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia.

The founding of this religious school brought about changes in social relations in the local community. It admitted not only Yunnanese Muslim children, but also South Indian children. Before the school opened, education was given to children at schools in mosques in various areas on Saturdays and Sundays, but as the mosques served only a single ethnic group, different ethnic groups seldom socialized with one another. By accepting South Indian children as well, the school expanded inter-ethnic reach. Some of the South Indian students studied religion very seriously and a number of its graduates went on to study in Arab countries, later becoming teachers or imams at mosques. Those who became teachers and imams at the Chang Klan and Chang Phueak mosques, which are attended by South Indian Muslims, graduated from the Jingzhen Islamic school in its early days. Such South Indian Muslims who acquired religious expertise in this way are now playing an indispensable role in religious events organized by the Yunnanese Muslims. They are often invited to give sermons or to teach at women's gatherings at the Ban Ho mosque. They also attend monthly, biannual, and annual committee meetings of mosques and the Chiang Mai Province's Islamic committee gatherings to discuss issues of Muslim society in northern Thailand and work out relevant policies.

5. Bottom-up Coexistence: Doing Good and Commensality during Ramadan

5.1 The important spirit of almsgiving

Mosques and the religious school therefore served as the foundation of horizontal relationships that developed between Muslims across ethnic groups. A variety of hospitality rituals are now held based on the Islamic calendar. In the following, by focusing on the aspects of people's faith that support the food rituals, we can understand the depth of people's religious practices which foster coexistence at a micro-local level.

In Islamic society, benevolent conduct is encouraged. Special emphasis is placed on having a spirit of almsgiving. Almsgiving in Islam is divided into voluntary almsgiving (*ṣadaqa*) and almsgiving specified as duty under Islamic law (*zakāt*). Among Chinese Muslims, almsgiving is also considered important to being a good Muslim. For example, the long horizontal board hung over the top of the Ban Ho Mosque, where I conducted a field study, contains the following inscription, an excerpt from surah 9 verse 18 of the Qur'an: "The mosques of Allah are only to be maintained by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day and establish prayer and give *zakāt* and do not fear except Allah." The importance of accumulating good deeds through almsgiving in Islam and the spirit of almsgiving can be clearly observed in Yunnanese Muslim communities.

Engaging in almsgiving involves not only providing aid in the form of money and goods to the weak, it also includes a variety of benevolent actions such as giving time and energy to help others, being kind and providing comforting words, and attending the funeral of acquaintances. What is important to note here is that almsgiving is not limited to the individual level with the goal of accumulating good deeds to go to heaven. It is also voluntarily carried out for mutual aid at the communal level. This aspect of almsgiving is seen in the religious practice of offering foods.

5.2 Ramadan and doing good for others

As mentioned above, while maintaining their ethnic identity, the Yunnanese Muslims coexist with other ethnic groups with respect to religious rituals. In particular, fasting (Ramadan), the festival of breaking the fasting month (*ʿĪd al-Fiṭr*), and the spirit of giving (*zakāt* or *ṣadaqa*) help to deepen their ethnic identity and also attract members of other ethnic groups. The first two are particularly important rituals for Muslims. The month of fasting is called Ramadan in Arabic and 斋月 (*zhai yue*) in Chinese, while fasting is 巴斋 (*ba zhai*) in Chinese. Muslims fast in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. They are allowed to eat from after sunset to before dawn. According to a study conducted in Thailand, ethnic Chinese Muslims eat together during Ramadan for one month, or 30 times, sharing tables at mosques. By taking turns, one Yunnanese representative hosts each evening meal. Mosques solicit such hosts by putting up a piece of white paper on their bulletin boards, on which Muslims who wish to become hosts write down their names and the dates when they wish to serve as hosts. The application sheet fills up very quickly every year. Some host for one day and others for several days (Photos 5, 6, 7).

Muslims enthusiastically support religious rituals in the belief that an act of



Photo 5 Chinese Muslims gather around a mosque during Ramadan, the month of fasting.



Photo 6 Chinese Muslims gather at a Chinese mosque for the “*Id al-Fitr*” ritual (Breaking of the Fasting) in Chiang Mai.



Photo 7 Myanmar and South Indian Muslims sitting together for dinner during Ramadan in a Chinese Mosque.

almsgiving (*zakāt* or *ṣadaqa*) is ordered by God and that good deeds will enable them to go to heaven. The month of Ramadan is the holiest month of the year and becoming a host during this month helps one achieve a great meritorious deed, which will be rewarded more than usual by God. Such belief prompts Muslims to take an active part in religious events.

Yunnanese Muslims thus invigorate their relations at mosques during the month of Ramadan. Their religious practices are open to other ethnic groups, who travel to various mosques during this period, visiting places of worship other than the ones they usually pray at. Impoverished Myanmar Muslims, who usually do not visit mosques run by the Yunnanese Muslims, and South Indian Muslims visit the mosques to feast on the great food prepared by the Yunnanese Muslims. Some Myanmar Muslim families travel for four or five days from areas near the border to eat at the mosques. Deprived Buddhists disguise themselves as Muslims during Ramadan to eat at mosques run by the Yunnanese Muslims. In the morning of the festival of breaking the fasting month, non-Yunnanese Muslims beg for food at the gates of the mosques. While the spirit of almsgiving breaks down the wall between Yunnanese and non-Yunnanese Muslims, the month of fasting and the festival of breaking it serve a space where inter-ethnic coexistence is possible through the act of eating together. Thus, the Yunnanese Muslims try to coexist flexibly with other ethnic groups through the practice of their Islamic religion at the grassroots level (Photo 8).

6. Conclusion

The Yunnanese Muslims became stateless refugees and have been marginalized by the Thai government since the mid-twentieth century. They have, however, attempted to



Photo 8 Non-Chinese Muslims beggars waiting for alms from Yunnanese Muslims on the morning of the “*Id al-Fitr*” ritual.

construct social spaces based on ethno-religious identity, which is shown in the construction of Yunnanese mosques. The mosques they constructed thus created a space for social bonds with their relatives and friends of Yunnanese origin. This caused an awakening of Islam in a form that bridged the gap between those Muslims who lived dispersed in the refugee villages and those who had arrived earlier and moved to urban cities. Nevertheless, what is important here is that their religious activities not only serve to maintain their ethno-religious identity, but also to create a communal place beyond ethnic boundaries in a multi-ethnic society. The fasting month of Ramadan especially serves to transmit a culture and a religious identity to succeeding generations. It is also an important occasion for Chinese Muslims to “make merit” through the performance of good deeds for both themselves and others. Moreover, Ramadan functions as an occasion when non-Chinese can share food and receive donations from the Chinese community. These religious practices of the immigrants indicate precisely the kind of “bottom-up coexistence” that unfolds through autonomous choices of the immigrants themselves and according to a logic that is quite dissimilar to the state’s policy of assimilation.

Notes

- 1) Immanuel Wallerstein’s “World System” is among the influential concepts dealing with center and periphery relations in social science (Wallerstein 1974). For further discussion on the center and periphery model in Southeast Asia, see Walker (1999), “Introduction.”
- 2) Suchart’s prominent work (2010) is written from a native anthropologist’s viewpoint.
- 3) As for Yunnanese Han Chinese in Burma, see Chang (2014).

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