

Globalization Through Economic Gateways: Opening up of Yunnan Towards Asian Neighbours

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The opening-up process of Yunnan has made the province a focus of study owing to its innovative development policies adopted by the provincial leaders towards integrating the province into the global economic process. The regional economic model thus adopted was based on the specific geographical and cultural position the province enjoyed historically as a part of the Southern Silk Road. The border towns and markets were quite developed and were the main point of flourishing trade between China and neighbouring countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Due to its limited connectivity and industrial backwardness, Yunnan has been referred to as a “periphery” in the mainstream development discourse and policy analysis. During Chinese President Hu Jintao’s visit in 2009, the concept of Bridgehead was introduced, which linked Yunnan with the idea of opening its southwest border region to the world outside. The paper discusses how the border regions were redefined as having greater transborder mobility, especially between border cities of neighbouring countries in China. Secondly, how did the historical and cultural factors have shaped the re-imagination of Yunnan province into an economic gateway towards China’s Asian neighbours?

Keywords: border regions, Yunnan, transborder mobility, Asian neighbours, globalization

Introduction

China especially in the last few years has made policies regarding the “repositioning” of peripheral regions, which are spatially selected by the state as strategic sites to promote capital accumulation (Su, 2013). These border regions have been redefined as economic gateways, which devised new development strategies. These border regions are no longer considered bounded territorial spaces but new geographic spaces of economic interactions between nations. In that sense, border regions are seen as new spatial spaces for building new connectivity between nations.

The process has been referred to as spatial selectivity through which the state strategically offers certain regions locational advantages and offers them preferential accumulation strategies, new state projects, and development agenda (Brenner, 2004). Through these policies, the state thus integrates once marginalized border regions into the changing global division of labour and capital and thus enhances their competitiveness in transnational markets. This is specifically the case in Yunnan, a vast borderland in the southwest part of China that remained neglected due to China’s coastal development strategy of 1978. Geographically, located at the intersection among China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, it has almost worked as a land bridge between these

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three geographical blocs. Historically, there has been cross-regional trade and cultural exchanges between Yunnan and through Yunnan with South Asia and Southeast Asia. Even culturally and ethnically, Yunnan has much closer ties with Southeast Asia.

Yunnan's geographical proximity with its Asian neighbours has been a key factor in shaping the new developmental approach. The province focused on creating transnational linkages with bordering countries through its border areas. Since the early 2000s, the coming of highways, rail lines, and airports has integrated Yunnan well into China's western economic region and Southeast Asia. The province was able to make excellent use of tourism potential as it is home to diverse traditions of ethnic minorities, Buddhist monasteries, and attractive destinations. Lijiang, Dali, Xishuangbanna, Baoshan, and Tengchong have preserved the local identity of the province and also have integrated with the global capitalist development through the flexibilities of opening up to the world outside. The regional economic model thus adopted was based on the specific geographical and cultural position that the province enjoyed historically as a part of the Southern Silk Road. The border towns and markets were quite developed and were the main point of flourishing trade between China and neighbouring countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The article examines firstly the historical process of the provincial opening up through its border areas which has made Yunnan quite an interesting case study in its opening up process towards its Asian neighbours.

Secondly, how did the provincial leadership envisage the border restructuring through the Bridgehead strategy of economic gateways?

Thirdly, how once mystic border towns like Ruili, Xishuangbanna, and Hekou have been transformed into vibrant economic centers through provincial preferential policies.

Yunnan as a Frontier Region

The frontiers have been defined as more of a relational place where there is a constant interaction of different cultures across borders; however, the border is here more a spatial place that is territorially marked for nation-states where they can exercise power to control the population residing in their territory. In Chinese terminology, *bianjiang* refers to the confluence of both borders and frontiers (Rippa, 2020, pp. 27-28). It encompasses both a space for cultural interaction and a physical boundary of the nation-state. Yunnan Province has been referred to geographically as a remote mountainous and backward region, having its local histories of resistance, rebellion, and assertion. The location of the province near the western borders of China made it difficult to govern and often created new boundaries as the province sought to create its own independent regional identity. The boundaries between central domination and local resistance, Han and non-Han, and frontier and Mainland get pushed and pulled back and forth through cycles of trade, revolts, and conquest experienced by this border province historically. Being a frontier region, Yunnan's identity was shaped by the incursion of European powers in search of mineral resources, especially coal, minerals, tin, and copper. The European colonial powers built new railway linkages, Catholic churches, and schools while the Chinese empire was preoccupied with the "civilizing mission" of so-called "barbarians living" in the southwest borders of China (Fitzgerald, 2002).

Different scholars have argued about the transnational orientation of the Yunnan Province located in the southwest part of China (Atwill, 2005). Since the 19th century, the ethnic communities especially along the western part of Yunnan dominated the cross-border trade. Dali regime had taken various measures to promote caravan trade and made promises to protect those traders who entered the Dali-controlled territory. Tengyue was famous for having a bazaar with stalls and shops selling items like dry goods, jade, and gold and also became the

main goods for trade with Burma. Yunnan had quite developed trade routes with the neighbouring countries. Most of the border areas located in Yunnan like Xishuangbanna, Dali Lijiang, Baoshan, and Tengyue were the economic gateway to the neighbouring countries. Initially, all these trade routes were used to import cotton from nearby regions to Yunnan and later Yunnan used these routes to export tea in these regions. Gradually, tobacco, silk, and other varieties of Chinese medicines constitute a good portion of Chinese cross-border trade through Yunnan. Besides, trade fairs in Dali are used to attract customers from other countries and bazaars. Bin Yang has also argued that Yunnan was never isolated due to its locational factors but was a part of global interaction as early as the 19th century. The presence of cowry currencies in Yunnan showed its connection with the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is more likely that these cowries arrived in Yunnan by Bengal through the sea route since navigation between Bengal and Maldives was much smoother than the overland route between Burma and Maldives (Yang, 2008). There was an existence of Yunnan-Burma and India road which witnessed the flows of trade and connectivity between the neighbouring countries. The emergence of booming trade made some of the border cities an important centre of trade and commerce. The border towns along the geographies of Yunnan were the earlier sites of export and business exchange. Tai from Xishuangbanna produced raw cotton and rough cloth that was transported into China and they often came to the border market to buy Chinese imported goods like Chinese needles and silk etc. (Giersch, 2006). Several towns near Tengyue also specialized in specific export items such as carpets, iron pots, wood oil, and honey. Some of the border people took advantage of the wilderness and produced herbs to start the herbal medicine trade. These trade networks in a big way have redrawn the regional boundaries and shaped the regional identity in significant ways. These border towns had periodic markets which have been defined largely by William Skinner as standard and central markets (Giersch, 2006). Standard markets usually cater to the rural producers in those areas and then the agricultural goods like cash crops and other handicraft items get exported to other places within the region. Merchants at the central market play an important role in the distribution of imported goods in that area. Slowly, these local towns have changed into centres of commercial networks. The indigenous communities of Yunnan, people from neighbouring countries, and merchants from other parts of China started selling silk, cotton, and embroideries. Besides, the basic exchange commodities like rice, grain, firewood, salt which the people used to buy from the growers, the commodities like raw cotton, finished clothes, tobacco, indigo, dried fish, bricks, liquor, and radishes were also offered as goods for trade. Tengyue was an important transit point for caravan trade to neighbouring countries like Burma. During the Resistance War for protecting numerous lives of various mountainous counties, horse caravans were formed and these also helped in transporting officers and soldiers and their provisions and ammunitions.

In this drive to unify and modernize these border regions with the mainland, the province retained its independence in terms of maintaining the local economic and political system and generating a spatial mode of new linkages as Dali and Kunming became a cosmopolitan centre of trade, commerce, and new cultural identities. So, Yunnan has this transnational connectivity with neighbouring countries like Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam in the Southeast Asian region at different stages. Yunnan was an important centre of Asian connectivity either as an important military post during different battles fought especially the War of Resistance or as an important centre of commercial exchange, caravan trade, and cross-border flow of people through a diversity of border markets and local interaction.

These frontier conditions shaped the economic growth of the region and changed the imagination of the place from being a backward periphery to new economic gateways of trade and economic cooperation. The

provincial leadership has thought of a new development model to build new regional alliances and generated the need for capital to build new infrastructure projects across borders. In this entire process of re-bordering, the provincial leadership has negotiated with the central government and created a new identity for territorial regional formation.

Yunnan and Opening to the Outside World

Yunnan has been referred to as a periphery in development concepts and policy paradigms. It was due to spatial characteristics, limited Connectivity, geographical proximity, and industrial backwardness. The concept of a Bridgehead or Gateway was formulated by the Chinese President in 2009. The main idea is that territorial factors are no longer seen as inhibiting factors, shared borders can have a new dimension for economic growth, and it will promote cross-border regional integration create a new form of regional economic model and further facilitate cross-border flow of commodities and market expansion. The main official document that gave the new push to Yunnan towards its opening up to the outside world was released in 2009 during Hu Jintao's visit to Yunnan. It was an important policy document as it provided a new strategic and regional positioning for the province. The official narratives have designated Yunnan the new status of being a gateway to link China with its South Asian and Southeast Asian neighbours. China's opening up to the southwest is considered to be a major strategic opportunity for the comprehensive economic and social development of Yunnan Province during the Twelfth Five-Year Plan period (Li, 2012; Han & Zhang, 2011; Z. Liu & S. Y. Liu, 2011). The main theme of the documents was to examine the possibilities and explore the potential of transforming Yunnan from being a frontier region into an economic corridor to its bordering countries.

The opening up process in Yunnan began from its border areas way back in 1980s. On June 6, 1978, Kunming City and Lunan Yi Autonomous County of Yunnan Province (now Shilin Yi Autonomous County) were approved by the State Council as areas open to foreigners, opening up the province to the outside world. In 1980, the Yunnan Provincial People's Government decided to resume small-scale trade on the China-Myanmar border. In 1984, Yunnan Province put forward a call to "adhere to the policy of opening up and engage in large-scale technological development". In March 1985, the Yunnan Provincial Government promulgated the "Yunnan Provincial Interim Regulations on Border Trade", which enabled 27 counties (cities) in Yunnan Province bordering neighbouring countries to conduct border trade. In January 1987, the Yunnan Provincial Government formulated "Several Regulations of Yunnan Province on Encouraging Foreign Investment". These policies have effectively promoted Yunnan's opening up to the outside world and promoted economic development (Ministry of Commerce, PRC, 2019).

The seventh economic coordination meeting of six provinces, regions, and municipalities was held in 1984. The Six Provinces, Regions and Municipalities Economic Coordination Council is an open and loose regional economic coordination organization jointly established by Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Tibet, Chongqing, Chengdu, and other major southwest provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities. The main purpose of establishing this coordination committee is to unite seven regions from six provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities, based on the actual situation of the southwest region, to maximize strengths and avoid weaknesses, give full play to advantages, implement the spirit of reform and opening up in the economic coordination of all parties, and explore a way to revitalize and develop backward industries. The main idea was to develop a new direction for the regional economy that could build the southwest region into a modern industrial base (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2007).

Yunnan Province was promoted to build an international channel which means establishing a smooth transportation system in the region which can “reach the river and sea, and connect the periphery” and connect the “three Asians and two oceans” (East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific and the Indian Ocean), making Yunnan as an important bridge between the three major economies in China, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. In 1985, the Yunnan provincial government further relaxed the border trade policy and broke through restrictions such as small amounts and short distances, and the situation was transferred from a few state-owned enterprises to multi-channel businesses. After 1988, Yunnan also established inter-governmental trade relations with Burma and Laos. At present, Yunnan border trade has formed a new pattern based on the national market, focusing on the three neighbouring countries to Southeast Asian and South Asian countries. The Yunnan provincial government has also adopted a series of measures to expand the opening up and promote the development of border trade. For example, there are three open-border cities and 17 national and provincial ports in Yunnan, strengthening the quality inspection of the export commodities of the border trade, and establishing the industrial linkages through external connections (Li, 1993; Zhu, 2000).

The main focus of these official documents was to transform these border regions into economic corridors and thus a complete layout was specified to link the main cities to the inland provinces of China and the border cities to the neighbouring countries. Attention was given to building infrastructure and enhancing connectivity through highways, railways, and airports. Tim Summers has argued that through the process of regional repositioning of Yunnan, the provincial leaders had developed regional imagination in confirmation with the centre’s directives. The development narratives of local provincial leaders juxtapose the contradictions or interactions between the policies to shape transborder Asian connections and the national policies that influence provincial agencies to follow the centre’s directives (Summers, 2013). Subsequently, the remote peripheries get tax preferential policies and flexible options in trade practices. The notion of border governance explains the presence of the state in creating the basic infrastructure and transforming these places into economic corridors; however, the local communities and non-state actors also play an important role of agency in contesting and mediating this presence of strong power and thus make them indispensable in the global process of interaction between the two countries.

Border Regions as Economic Zones

Border trade between Yunnan and the neighbouring countries has gone through different stages. It has played a positive role in promoting Yunnan’s economic and social development and opening up the province to the outside world.

The opening up of Yunnan to its neighbouring countries began in the 1980s when the provincial government initiated the policy of border trade. The provincial government decided to resume border trade on a small scale along the Sino-Burma border in Dehong. In 1984, the State Council regulated that small-scale trade should be managed by the provincial government and should be carried out under the principles of Five Self—self-seeking goods, self-seeking market, self-negotiation, self-keeping balance, and self-financing. Initially, the border trade was limited to state-owned trading companies; subsequently they relaxed the policies by allowing individuals and organizations to participate in that. It broke through restrictions on the quantity and made it open for multichannel business (Yeung & Shen, 2004). In 1992, the State Council approved the opening up of Kunming and other border cities like Ruili and Hekou in Yunnan and announced preferential policies with Laos and

Vietnam. This was the beginning of national policy on the development of border trade along border areas. Gradually, there were preferential policies for the exemption of the import tariff and value-added tax (product) on more than 160 varieties of agricultural, forestry, fishing, byproducts, local products, and minerals and the relaxation of policies in the areas of border trade and trade control were formulated. These policies led to a substantial increase in the volume of border trade. Several enterprises formed the trade-related export base in Yunnan mainly in Kunming, Honghe, Dali, Baoshan, and Dehong and became the processing zone of tobacco, textile, light industry, building material, chemical hardware, and mechanical, food and beverage.

In 2007 June, during the 11th FYP, the State Council issued a programme for the Prosperity of the Border Population which is possible only by promoting border trade and regional economic cooperation. In 2010, the Bank of China, Revenue Department, Commerce Department, Customs and Tax Department, and China Banking Regulatory Commission issued a circular on the usage of RMB in cross-border exchange. From 2012 onwards, there were official guidelines on creating a new model of development by expanding cross-border economic cooperation in Yunnan (Zhang, 2013; Xie, 2010).

James Scott's "The Art of Not Being Governed" uses the concept of *Zomia* which mainly talks about the anarchist history of Southeast Asia. *Zomia* refers to the uncharted contact zones between the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Southwest China. He argued that the movement across borders pushed the idea of seeking refuge away from state control. Martin Saxer redefined the border areas as fortune-seeking by arguing that it is not escaping state control but rather mediating them to look like more attractive options (Saxer & Zhang, 2017). The paper applies this framework to examine how the border economic zones have been transformed into new centers of prosperity for the inhabitants in these areas and how economic zones in Ruili, Hekou, Wanding, and Xishuangbanna have been projecting the model of state developmentalism. It also creates non-state spaces for economic and social freedom free from the discipline of the state.

China-Myanmar

Jiegao in Ruili has emerged as a bustling border trade market that attracts traders from Myanmar and different parts of China. The market is famous for selling jade mainly dominated by Chinese and Myanmar jade traders. Ruili City where the Dehong area is located has two national Class A ports and the Jiegao Border Trade Zone. Dehong area has emerged as the main trading hub in opening up to the domestic and outside world (Belt and Road Portal China, 2023).

Ruili has been designated as a major city connecting Yunnan and Myanmar. Ruili has often been referred to as actively stimulating economic development in its border region. Jiegao's role in economic growth was further elevated when a special export processing zone policy was implemented in 2000. In more recent years Ruili's importance has moved far beyond a mere border market. This bustling city with a large international population due to transborder mobilities has become more regionally important in China's push to develop its vast western region; it has also become global by extending its influence across its borders. For example, the Master Plan of the Ruili Experimental Zone, approved by China's National Development and Reform Commission on August 12, 2013, was intended to boost Ruili as a gateway for economic activities and transborder flows with the neighbouring Southeast Asian economies. Major infrastructure investment over the years has strengthened Ruili's role as an increasingly open, though rather complicated, land port. Under the border trade agreement signed in August 1994, Myanmar set up a border trade office in Muse, which was later expanded to provide more rapid service in April 2006. Now, merchants can freely export goods from across the

country to Muse and export licenses can be issued on the spot within one day after a formal sales contract is confirmed with buyers on the Chinese side (Kudo, 2006). This has greatly facilitated trade between the two countries. During the year of 2012-2013, the central and local governments started this plan for the Ruili Experimental Zone, which included many new infrastructure projects, such as industrial parks and trading centres to transform Ruili as a new gateway for economic activities. Besides, cross-border tourism was promoted by providing easy access to cross-border passes to the people from both sides. On 27 November 2013, the Ministry of Public Security and National Tourism Administration and the Wenshan, Honghe, Xishuangbanna, Baoshan officially approved the Exit-Entry Administration of Yunnan Public Security Department, and Dehong prefectures were allowed to have cross-border mobilities through facilitating applications for border traveling from different locations (Bie, Li, & Zhou, 2014). Song and others argue that the transformation of Ruili from a small border city to a main economic hub became possible through the mega-project investments made by the central authorities. Historically, known as Wanding Town, Ruili was an important centre of engagement between China and Southeast Asia along the Southern Silk Road. Ruili Municipal Government wanted to transform Ruili as the main political, economic, and cultural centre of Dehong promoting trade, tourism, and processing industries and thus making it a unique border city with its ethnic features (Song, Chahine, & Sun, 2020).

China-Laos

The growth of a new economic model in Laos became possible through its closer proximity to Yunnan province, China. Pal Nyiri has argued how the development of instant cities along the peripheries brought significant changes with promises of modernization and prosperity. Yunnan Province Reform and Development Commission played a key role in the economic development of Northern Laos by setting up free trade zones, cash crop cultivation like rubber and cassava, and proposals on industrial tourism and residential development. The creation of Special Economic Zones like the model of Shenzhen in these distantly located territories transforms these regions from local to global areas of attraction for investors (Nyiri, 2012).

China especially from Yunnan has built several railways and other infrastructure networks to connect Yunnan to Laos. The construction of the railroad from Kunming to Hekou was completed and put into operation in 2014. The China-Lao railway, which runs from Kunming to Vientiane, the capital of Laos has come into operation by 2022. It has greatly reduced the transportation time for the businessmen. According to an estimate, throughout December 2023, over 7,000 freight trains shipped 29.1 million tons of cargo on the China-Laos railways. Earlier it carried agricultural items like rubber, cassava, and bananas. Now, it is moving construction materials, fresh vegetables, flowers, and other consumer products (Chen, 2023). Besides, under the Going Global Strategy, Yunnan has also established several China-Lao agricultural science and technology demonstration parks in Laos, Cambodia, and other regions.

On 3 March 1992, the State Council of China approved Mohan as a national-level Class I trading port. On 22 December 1993, the Chinese and Lao governments formally opened the Mohan-Boten international ports. In August 1994, Mohan port was officially declared to be open to personnel from a third country. The launching of international regular bus services and visa services at Mohan port has helped to create a good environment for the development of Mohan port. In June 2000, the Yunnan government designated Mohan Port as a border trade zone and accorded it some preferential policies (Lei & Chen, 2021, p. 119). After the establishment of the Mohan Border Trade Area by the Chinese government, the central government of Laos also set up a free trade area at Boten, which borders Mohan.

China-Vietnam

The historical memories of war continue to haunt the relations of these two countries, but the constant movement of traders, tourists, and workers makes the collaborations go on. Zhang Juan has argued that the intimate relations thus developed between the two countries are most often accompanied by caution and uneasiness. In a bid to consolidate China-Vietnam neighbourhood relations, the Yunnan provincial government with China's Ministry of Commerce had started the Annual China-Vietnam border trade fair as the first official trade initiative in 2001 having its symbolic significance.

Hekou as a Border Economic Zone was opened up in Yunnan to strengthen the economic relations between the two countries which have been transformed into Pearl City (China news, 2023).

However, a couple of incidents of traders protesting at the economic zone indicate that even rhetoric of friendship and harmony is capable of producing confrontation and distrust. Trade with Vietnamese seems to be more of a necessity than a choice. The cross-border trade goes on through multiple formal and informal channels instrumental in building a new sense of partnership between the two countries. In 1992, following the normalization of relations, the border towns became the bustling centres of economic activities. Zhang (2018) has interviewed traders along the borderlands and discovered the transformation from the "frontier work" to one that of entrepreneurs. As the state policies continue to become more flexible regarding the control of the border, in this situation the local government creates a new social space that falls within the preview of permissive policies for entrepreneurship. Most often local businessmen do not consider tax evasion and bribery practices to be illegal as it is essentially done in collaboration with state gatekeepers. Thus, borderlands often negotiate between official regulatory practices and flexible forms of business engagements.

How New Transborder Regional Spaces Are Created

In Yunnan's case, border opening up was mostly carried out in the form of bilateral and regional cooperation with neighbouring countries. Chen (2018) has argued how once remote and undeveloped cities from the western border regions of China have benefitted immensely through infrastructure connectivity and transportation networks with Southeast Asian economies.

While the national state is usually the most powerful actor as the shaper and enforcer of border policy, linking regional cities has deterritorialized the borders by promoting trans-border mobility through trade, tourism, and employment, especially between physically linked border cities. As a result of this globalization, processes are mediated through and incorporated within local processes of place-making where intentional and reactive decentralization is initiated by the national state, the local state at the border has become relatively more autonomous in determining transboundary mobilities (Anderson, 2010). This stretches the mobility of goods and natural resources across more places and longer distances through rural landscapes, creating new frontier urban footprints. Despite being subordinate to both the central and local state, the citizens in border cities have become more mobile and active in initiating and changing cross-border flows. Additionally, the citizen in border cities often relies on unique national networks that may differ from those of the dominant nationality of the state, making consistent top-down control much harder. By decentralizing and relocating development priority to southwestern Yunnan and its border region, the Chinese government has "scaled down" administrative decision-making to allow this underdeveloped frontier to catch up.

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