

Mapping Local Effects of Globalization in China: 21st-Century Migration Flows from Southeast Asia to Yunnan Province

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Abstract

International migration into China in recent years has seen both growth and variegation, and emerged as a topic of concern in national public and political discourse. Long-term migrants seeking to occupy existing economic niches throughout the country have transformed the familiar narrative of foreign students and elite expatriates clustered in China's coastal cities. Within China's national media and existing scholarship on contemporary China, the primary symbol of this "new" migration—a consequence of China's increased economic globalization—has been African migrant communities within the southern coastal city of Guangzhou (Canton). In terms of sheer numbers, however, nearly 60 percent of migrants to China are economic migrants claiming nationality in an adjacent Asian country. Moreover, the patterns associated with this new economic migration vary widely by region and province. Geography matters, in ways that more sensationalized national narratives often conceal. This article utilizes recently published information from the first national census to record China's foreign population, as well as supporting economic data and public opinion surveys, to construct a spatially-sensitive representation of migration into the country using ArcGIS software. The resulting snapshot of globalization and its sub-national effects reveals a regionally uneven pattern of migration—its principal destinations, and correlation with other indices of "openness" toward globalization and global institutions—within China, as well as one which provides intriguing parallels with historical linkages between China's various economic cores and adjacent regions beyond China's national borders. Following an overview of the phenomenon of new economic migration to China, and the correlation of this migration with sub-national public opinion concerning globalization and economic regionalization within Asia, the paper focuses on the case study of Yunnan province. Yunnan is perhaps the most important, but yet often overlooked, destination for cross-border migration into China via its southwestern border with Southeast Asia. Outranking Guangzhou in terms of share of total foreign population, Yunnan has become a corridor for the new economic migration and, as such, provides a crucial window on how the combined processes of globalization and regionalization will impact China's provinces by tying them to neighboring countries and populations. Thus, the case of overground migration at China's inland borders challenges the perception that China's future expansion and influence will be primarily through maritime trade.

Keywords: China, international migration, globalization

1. Introduction:

New flows of international migration to China in recent years, though occurring at much slower rates than internal migration within the country, have introduced a complex system of issues that transcend national boundaries and are driven by the fluctuations of foreign economies. Additionally, in contrast to convention, the term "immigrant" and

its aspects of attachment is hardly used in China, and instead, “foreigners” (境外人員, lit., “people from beyond the borders”) and *lǎowài* (老外, lit., “familiar outsider”) are used, emphasizing immutable foreignness. Most recently, in-migration has been captured by controversy over misbehaved foreigners and the arresting image of African migrant communities in the southern coastal city of Guangzhou. Despite sensationalized accounts of African migration, groundbreaking information released in 2011 by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) illustrates a different narrative that is first heavily centered on the region of Asia, and second, variable by region and province. This allows for a more precise construction of how “China”—its population of 1.3 billion people spread across 3.7 million square miles—has been affected by international migration and globalization.

Although local economies may share globalized connections and vertical integration into the structure of the Chinese government, they are distinguished by unique factor endowments and geography, local government policies, and socioeconomic climates. Therefore, this paper will utilize a sub-national perspective by illustrating provincial-level foreign population, economic, and public opinion data within a complex migratory network system that considers state and local government institutions as well as global forces. The data will be viewed from a spatially-sensitive perspective with geographic information system (GIS) software (Esri ArcGIS 10.1). The resulting image is of uneven patterns of globalization within the country. Yunnan province arises in the present data as an exemplary case study in that it defies the expected coastal bias observed in many other aspects of globalization in China. Further interpretation of why Yunnan may represent an anomalous case of uneven regional patterns of migration in the country is subsequently pursued through a brief examination of recent economic development efforts and its ties with neighboring Southeast Asia.

2. Current Patterns and the State Response:

As of November 2010, 593,832 foreign residents were counted in China. Overall, a vast majority were from the Asian continent and Russia, accounting for just over 60 percent of all foreigners in the most recent census, with a large proportion of Asian nationals coming from East Asia and Southeast Asia.¹ Although foreigners barely constituted 0.05 percent of China’s population, the ability to predict future patterns of this growing population will first require an understanding of its present spatial distribution. The parsing of such patterns by country of origin and region of destination can inform the impact that this new influx of foreigners will have upon different communities throughout the nation.

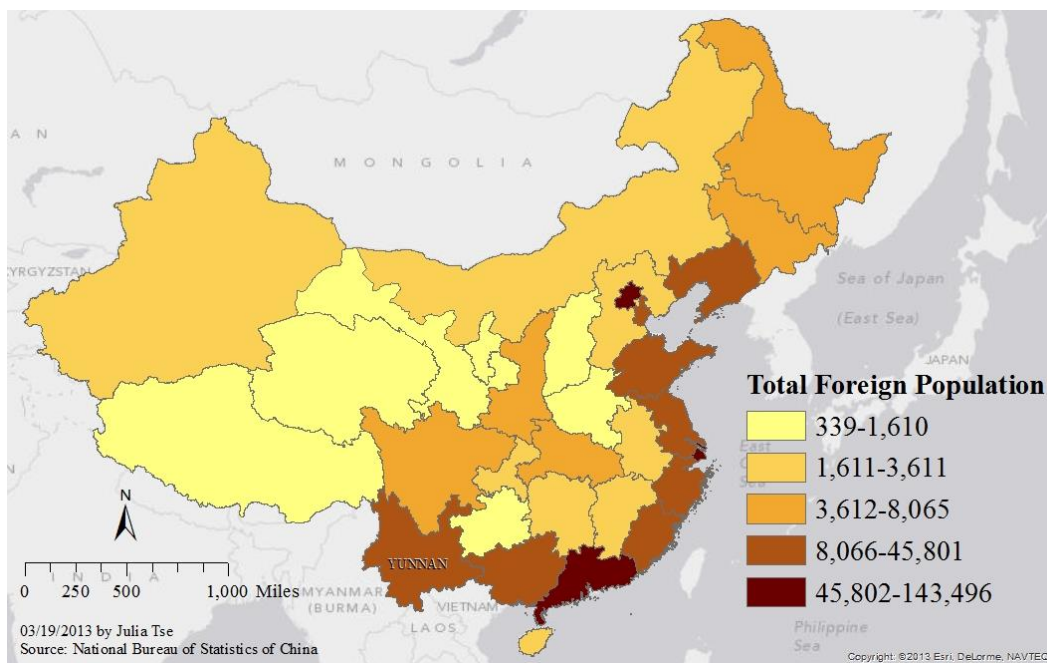


Figure 1. Distribution of foreign population within China in 2010.

Over half of all foreigners lived in the coastal provinces of Shanghai, Beijing, or Guangdong. Nevertheless, it is notable that this trend was not without exception; the inland region of Yunnan was ranked fourth in overall foreign population size. Although no temporal data exists to attest to the progression of the current data, the overall distribution of foreigners in China unsurprisingly suggests higher concentrations in the more developed regions of the nation. This coastal bias, which has been prevalent in popular knowledge of modern China, overlooks the impact of geographic proximity on transaction costs, as well as newer patterns of migration revealed in the new data in the Western regions of Guangxi, Sichuan, and Shaanxi, as well as in Liaoning and Heilongjiang in the Northeast. The distribution of foreigners counted in the 2010 national census is mapped in the figure above.

2.1. Types Of Foreigners:

Recent scholarship on international migration to China has begun to build a more comprehensive image that better reflects the new data. Frank Pieke, a scholar at Leiden University specializing in migration to China, has categorized foreign migrants as students, professionals, cross-border migrants, and “casual fortune seekers,” each of which, Pieke qualifies, is not distinct from the other.² Migrants from neighboring Southeast Asia and North Korea enter China in search of work, but also as a part of the strong ethnic, familial, and trade networks that inevitably form along borders. At the intersections of these categories lies an assortment of challenges that will undoubtedly magnify as more foreigners decide to live, work, and raise their families in China.

2.2. The State Response:

Despite its new patterns of international migration, China has had a relatively short history of migration policy. The current model of migration policy, largely unchanged from periods of low migration, is focused on control and short-term residence.³ This regime of migration policy precludes the normalization of new migration flows that have fulfilled the demands of the globalized Chinese labor market. This major bureaucratic obstacle is manifested in problems experienced in nearly every form of migration, ranging from exploited Vietnamese laborers to professional workers who, after decades of living in China, need to regularly leave the country to renew short term visas. For migrants with intentions to reside in China in the long-term, permanent residence, though theoretically possible, is difficult to attain, and is most often granted to ethnic Chinese.⁴ Therefore, the inability of migrants to gain legal equity in their new community of residence poses a significant challenge to the efficiency of the global labor market and further economic development. Nevertheless, the outlook for policy change is not entirely bleak—a new discussion resulted in an updated immigration law in June of 2012. The new legislation, the first of its kind since 1985 will take effect in July of 2013, focuses on creating a harsher penal system for illegal migrants and introduces changes to various visa processes. As interpreted by Gary Chodorow, a U.S. immigration lawyer currently working in Beijing, the text of the law allows for “administrators to enact implementing regulations” and “officers to exercise their discretion,” suggesting the need for a greater focus on local authorities and consequences.⁵

3. A Configuration of International and Local Forces:

Explicating the consequences of globalization within a local economy and community requires an understanding of sub-national inequality within China as well as significant sources of external influence and exchange. Together, this configuration can provide additional insight into the observed sub-national patterns of international migration.

3.1. China’s Economic Geography:

Vast geographic, economic, and demographic diversity within China predicts that international migration is experienced differently between different regions. The roots of discrete systems of local commerce and governance was first proposed by G. William Skinner, an anthropologist and scholar in Chinese studies, who termed “physiographic macroregions” as defined by geographic features—connected through river systems and limited by mountain ranges. In 19th-century China, Skinner argued, natural resources and transport efficiency drew a unique blueprint for urbanization, eventually giving rise to modern-day regions.⁶ Despite economic growth at the national level, severe regional disparities remain—in 2010, the highest gross regional product (GRP) per capita was US\$19,191 in Shanghai, while the country’s lowest GRP was US\$3,309 in the southwest province of Guizhou.⁷ This

entrenched pattern of regional disparity remains an important fixture in any issue of national concern. As interrelated issues, development and globalization both influenced attitudes on the new international forces of Chinese society.

The diversity of public sentiment within the country is illustrated in public opinion on globalization. An overview of relevant data from the Public Opinion and Foreign Policy survey collected in 2006 provides insight into how China's economic geographies may translate into regional trends of how international migration is received. Although the range of responses across provinces was comparable, strong relative trends can be observed. For example, some provinces were consistently at extremes in response to questions on economic internationalization, such as in the case of coastal Hebei. Questions focused on the integration of Asia revealed similar trends with Sichuan and Henan consistently ranking at extremes.⁸ The diversity broadly demonstrated in this sample of the data shows the extent to which regional differences are expressed at the societal level. As has been demonstrated by two field researchers, Adams Bodomo and Enyu Ma, who conducted projects in African communities in Guangzhou and Yiwu, the sensitivity of migration systems may engender regional competition for foreign investment and labor.⁹

3.2. Beyond The Chinese Narrative: From Southeast Asia To Yunnan:

In a contemporary context regarding external migration, unfolding the local patterns of migration and its consequences demands an awareness of relevant actors and the outcomes of their interactions. Pieke, in studying economic development in the Yunnan town of Hongyan, argued that current research on China aggrandizes the “state-society dichotomy in which the state inevitably has to yield more and more of its power to entrepreneurs, foreign investors, and non-state organizations and communities.” In contrast, Pieke argues for the view that the state, as a complex structure with many components and actors, exists *within* society.¹⁰ Similarly, as an issue that conjures the dominance of the state with its ties to citizenship and nationalism, international migration nonetheless entails a great deal of engagement at levels outside of the central government.

In-migration to China offers an exemplary case of this perspective—the central government has yet to coordinate immigration affairs under a single department. Local governments possess considerable control over various aspects of the issue, ranging from attracting foreign investment to immigration enforcement. Although local law enforcement campaigns to crackdown on illegal forms of migration have cropped up across the country, Yunnan seems to have largely avoided the national spotlight.¹¹ At the same time, the province has seen a 114 percent increase in foreign-funded enterprises from 2005 to 2010, far exceeding such growth in Shanghai and Guangdong, as reflected in Figure 2. This may speak to a broader pattern of growing external interest in regions beyond the saturated markets of the coast.¹² In the long view, refocusing studies of China's continued rise in the world towards regions outside of the Coastal Region may mirror the ways in which globalization has strengthened some of the country's historical sources of power—strategic geography and proximity to an array of sub-regions in Asia.

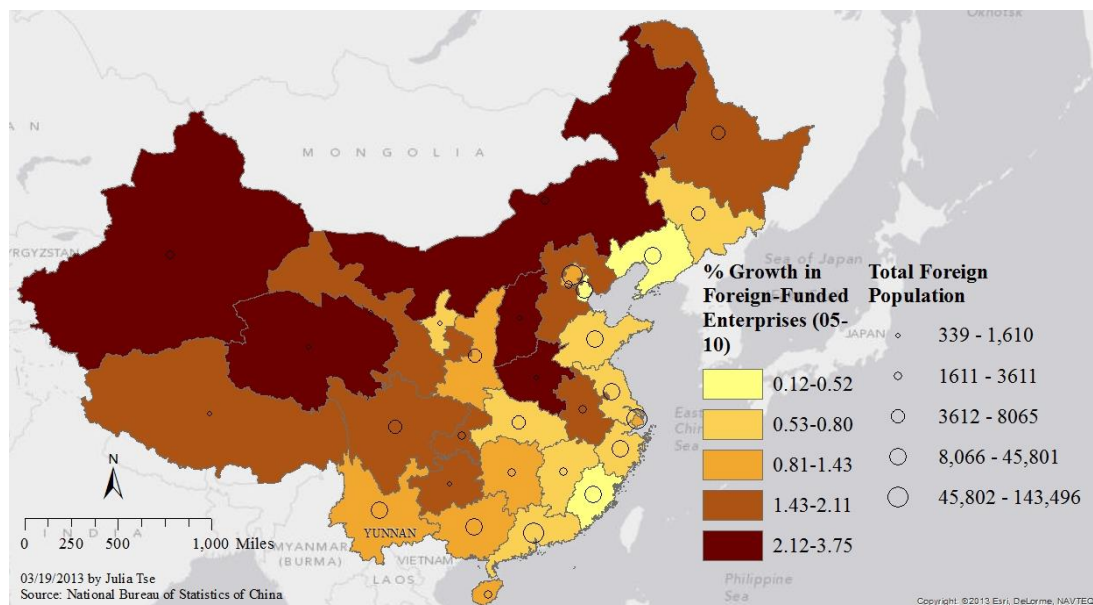


Figure 2. Growth in foreign-funded enterprises from 2005 to 2010 and total foreign population by province.

3.2.1. global influences

Stipulating to the interrelatedness of economic development and migration decisions, a grasp of Chinese migration patterns is incomplete without insight into the various global landscapes that shape market forces of migration and the proliferation thereof in official and popular responses. Nearly 60 percent of China's foreign population claimed Asian nationality; at the forefront is cross-border migration to the northeast from North Korea and to the southwest from Southeast Asian countries. With the Southeast Asian sub-region accounting for over 20 percent of the foreign population in 2010 and the state of China-Southeast Asian relations, the border provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi are crucial to regionalism. Despite trailing the rest of the nation in income, the two regions have surpassed the top two sending countries of Southeast Asia in the same index.¹³

Although migration can be economically advantageous for individuals and businesses, it can also exasperate global inequality, particularly for countries unable to compete with booming Chinese industries. The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which is an Asian Development Bank (ADB) project that includes Yunnan, Guangxi, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, is germane to the matter of economic development in southwest China.¹⁴ Among other areas of integration, the project has improved transportation and trade within the region, and encouraged labor migration as a form of joint development. Given economic theories of migration, a strong positive correlation between income inequality and the number of economic emigrants would be expected within the region, and would be amplified by geographic proximity for its effect on transport costs.¹⁵ In the 2010 census, two of the three countries bordering Yunnan were also the top sending countries of Southeast Asia, as modeled in Figure 3.

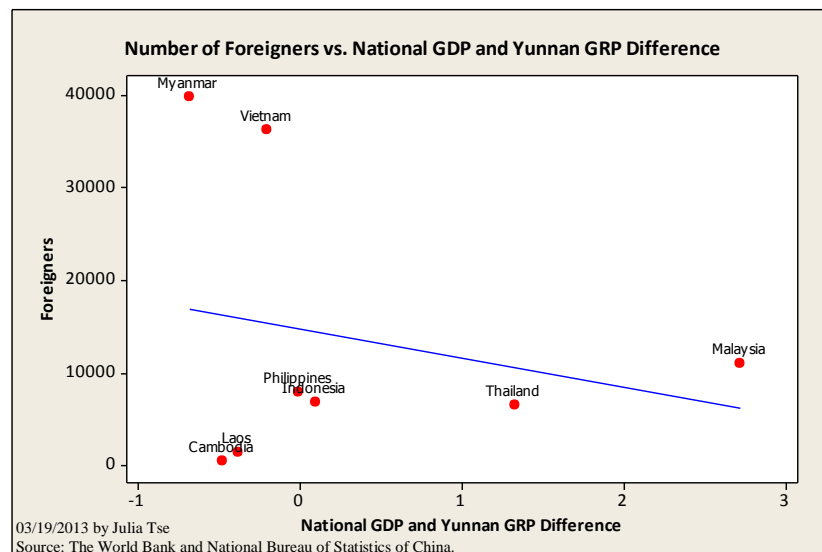


Figure 3. Comparison of number of foreigners and sending country GDP as percentage of Yunnan GDP.

In response to the humanitarian concerns raised over increased migration within the sub-region—physical and sexual abuse, exploitation, social and health services, and legal rights—several GMS countries have issued bilateral Memorandums of Understanding (MoU), acknowledging the needs of the labor market and making strides in preventing exploitation of migrants. To date, however, no MoU has been issued with Yunnan or Guangxi.¹⁶ In spite of this, the GMS program promises to magnify already growing flows of intra-GMS migration. A major piece of the current strategic framework, transport, includes plans for developing highways and an intra-GMS railway.¹⁷ These finer details of globalization and regionalization, therefore, are important modifiers in constructing a more precise understanding of how different parts of China will continue to be affected by economic integration and growth.

3.2.2. local consequences

It is of little coincidence that the distribution of foreigners has traditionally been concentrated in the coast, where the importance of Skinnerian geography has persisted. A multi-dimensional basis for understanding distinct characteristics of regions that is otherwise lost when viewing the nation as a uniform whole allows for interpretation

beyond the archetype of transnational Western expatriates living in Shanghai or Africans living in Guangzhou. With no indication of the international migration into the country subsiding in the coming years, projections of the future of migration patterns into the country may be elucidated through sub-national cases, such as in Yunnan.

Migration to Yunnan, however, is not a temporally discrete phenomenon; the linkages that span the southern borders of China have a long history of mercantilism.¹⁸ Even so, public opinion on China's southern neighbors as represented in the modern-day international organization of the ASEAN indicates that geographic proximity and historical contact are not the only factors that may influence opinions regarding organs of regionalism. Despite its proximity to Southeast Asia, respondents in Yunnan did not represent the most favorable responses in the country.¹⁹

The present contextual information of the progress of globalization in Yunnan redirects research on international migration to a new social unit of study as an alternative to discussions of China as a whole. The push and pull factors that are specific to a province, such as the GMS in the case of Yunnan, permit for unwieldy macro-data to be interpreted in a manner that allows for the anticipation of obstacles to further growth and peace. From the case of Yunnan, it is evident that patterns of globalization in China are determined by an intricate system of domestic and external actors. A confluence of historically-bound and trade-facilitated ties across national borders is continually renegotiated between local, national, and external actors in forming new patterns of migration. Concomitant to the establishment of networks conducive to local ecologies was the formation of strong cross-border identities.²⁰

Public opinion data is perhaps indicative of the lower limits of these units of study. Although policies and partnerships forged by provincial governments necessarily modify the overarching narrative of globalization to be unique from other provinces, the outcomes of the measures may still be experienced differently within the province. The fact remains, however, that the relative income disparity between Yunnan and Shanghai is substantial—a principal circumstance that undoubtedly colors how the omnipotent forces of globalization are perceived. Ultimately, requisite in understanding “China's rise” is a perspective that is cognizant of unique economic geographies and social ecologies that determine how the untenable forces of globalization may develop.

4. Conclusion:

While migration into China remains a relatively new topic of study, conventional knowledge of it remains heavily biased towards the country's coastal regions. The first section of this paper challenged the canon of popular discourse and scholarly research, which has been a focus on the particularly conspicuous flow of migration from sub-Saharan African countries. A closer dissemination of the data released by the NBS show that African migrants only account for about 2.4 percent of all foreigners and calls attention to two overlooked sides of external migration to China: Asia as a major source of migrants and a geographical pattern of the distribution of foreigners across the country. The second section of this paper concentrated on Yunnan province, a region that the collected data indicates is overlooked in importance. Based on historical links and recent developments in Yunnan as it relates to its Southeast Asian neighbors, a provincial unit of significance is proposed as an alternative that international migration research may utilize for more meaningful analysis beyond the monolithic national unit. In sum, the story of international migration in Yunnan province directly challenges the coastal lens through which China is often understood in, and further shows that the effects of globalization are not uniformly absorbed across a country, but intensified differentially through economic geography and managed through the state and civil society.

4.1. The Future Of Globalization And Regionalism In China:

The fact that geographic proximity and time-cultivated connections may triumph in the future carries particular weight in a discussion of globalization. The case of migration into China shows first that a national-level perspective is impractical for a country of its geographic size and that the most pressing nexus of international migration is often determined by distance. With the presence of well-established transnational communities along the porous southwestern and northeastern borders, it is evident that the fastest-growing group of foreigners will continue to flow from nearby countries. On the topic of the future of migration policy in China, Pieke views a new body of research as important in its contributions to questions of whether “China, as a new global centre, [will] be able to resist the easy temptations of imagined autochthonous homogeneity, immigration-phobia and aggressive nationalism” and whether there will be an “emergence of a general set of policies aimed at pluralism in the context of rapid mobility and social change” that includes its foreign residents. Although the official count of foreigners in 2010 was just under 600,000, unofficial estimates have been as high as 2 million.²¹ With an aging population and

continued economic growth, the labor vacuum in China will only continue to pull international migrants from less developed neighboring countries. Furthermore, continued economic growth—achieved on the backs of disenfranchised labor migrants—is inseparable from humanitarian concerns that are intrinsic in institutionalized invisibility.

4.2. Anthropological Research In Contemporary China:

The spatial focus of this research on recent in-migration to China highlights the necessity of building nuanced and ethnographic knowledge of social groups to challenge old paradigms. Historically, the notion that a smaller social unit could be studied as culture writ large was endemic to the field of anthropology, especially in earlier studies of “savages.”²² As applied to contemporary issues, scholarship in this area must recognize that national political boundaries do not dictate a uniform political ecology of actors and environment. In 1936, anthropologist Maurice Freedman lamented that some of the field’s most revered functionalist anthropologists, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski, both saw the study of Chinese culture as one that could be distilled from the study of the social unit of a small village—that “[b]y becoming acquainted with the life of a small village, we study, under a microscope as it were, the epitome of China at large.”²³ Decades after the opening of the borders to foreign ethnographers, relics of this simplistic view remain ubiquitous in the rhetoric about China. In the time being, the country as a whole has undergone industrialization, urbanization, and economic liberalization, but little of how these transformations have manifested differentially across China is discussed. Rather, the monolithic whole of China—all of its parts, unique identities, clustered communities, and economic geographies—has been conflated with its recent rise as a global force, without revision to the plurality of change that has since occurred. A study of the complex issue of international migration into China articulates a more focused method of understanding globalization.

4.2. Forward Perspectives On Understanding Globalization Within China:

The presented data highlights the importance of Asia regionalism as well as a sub-national perspective in studying globalization in China, but is nonetheless limited by inequalities within provinces. Determining other units of study—whether within the province or stretching across provincial borders—is dependent upon the question at hand. For example, in the case of Yunnan, the border towns of Ruili and Jiegao may be more relevant than the provincial capital. However, if the long view of migration through this specific corridor is under consideration, then the unit of significance may extend from these border towns, through its transport linkages or family networks, to areas with low transaction costs. That is, the scope of the problem being studied defines the type of information and degree of connections that are best employed in coming to a solution.

International in-migration is changing China from within, at variable velocities. Historically, the diversity that exists within ethnic markers of what it means to be Chinese has often been trounced by Orientalist inclinations that are pervasive in how China is viewed from the outside. Such leanings have distorted understandings of how economies and communities have developed according to the limitations of geography and the natural corridors of exchange. From a micro-perspective, migration into Yunnan province is striking in that it is distinct from migration into other parts of the country. In a globalized China, it is more constructive to understand localized actors and their external linkages. These units can elucidate both old and new networks that facilitate globalization.

International in-migration in China deeply intersects with domestic and international inequality in income and development, or the push and pull factors that guide migration decisions. Yunnan retains a unique relationship with parts of Southeast Asia through the GMS. The dominance of a coastal narrative in describing growth in China is therefore inadequate for taking into account the various pathways of globalization that have been strategically formed to optimize the unique factor endowments of a locality. As other regions in China—the Northeast and Korea, Guangzhou and Africa—undergo similarly particularized courses of globalization, it will be ever more important to emphasize a spatial understanding of the nature of such changes taking place in China.

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