

Neither Kin nor Outsider: The Making of the Sino-Burmese Community in Huaxin Street Under the Cold War

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Abstract

This article draws on government archives and ethnographic fieldwork to examine the making of the Sino-Burmese community in Huaxin Street. It analyzes this process through three analytical lenses: Cold War geopolitics, the Republic of China's overseas Chinese affairs system, and global production chains. Existing studies have tended to conceptualize this settlement as an ethnic enclave or to focus on processes of transnational ethnic acculturation. By contrast, this article argues that Huaxin Street reveals the broader ambiguities and contradictions of state classification produced by Cold War legacies. These contradictions became especially salient amid Taiwan's political transformation and contested nation-building projects.

Sino-Burmese migration was shaped by regional wars, political violence, natural disasters, and open-ended, multi-sited trajectories of displacement. In the late 1960s, anti-Chinese violence in Myanmar prompted the onward movement of Sino-Burmese refugees to Taiwan, with the overseas Chinese affairs system serving as the primary institutional channel. The ROC government treated these arrivals as "Overseas Chinese" and potential intelligence assets, categorizing them as "non-foreigners," while simultaneously questioning their political loyalty.

At the same time, Taiwan was incorporated into the Island Chain Strategy and the broader Cold War industrial order. The establishment of Texas Instruments's plant in northern Taiwan generated new labor demand. Sino-Burmese migrants mobilized kinship-based labor networks to secure employment, establish households, and consolidate a settlement in the area. During the 1980s and 1990s, political instability in Myanmar, combined with acute labor shortages in Taiwan, contributed to the community's continued growth. Yet even when ancestry and documentation were uncertain, many migrants were granted "Overseas Chinese" status through discretionary procedures—an expedient mode of incorporation that left their membership institutionally unsettled. The classificatory uncertainty and migrants' strategic navigation of it turned Huaxin Street into an interstitial space within both the city and the state: neither fully kin nor simply outsiders.