

Poverty and Migration from Burma: Within and Without Midi Z's Films¹

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Ever since I was little, poverty has been chasing me like a beast, compelling me to keep on running. Many other Burmese young people face the same condition and are forced to leave their homes to cities or abroad for making a living. Escaping poverty is the main cause of their migration, and acquiring wealth is their earnest wish. (Zhao 2015:65)

Midi Z, also known as Zhao De-Yin (or Kyawk Dad-Yin 趙德胤) is a fourth-generation Yunnanese Chinese migrant born in 1982 in Lashio, northern Shan State in Burma (or Myanmar).² Like the

¹I am indebted to Ardeth Maung Thawngmung's careful reading of my paper and her meticulous and useful suggestions for my revision. For writing this paper, I have drawn on reports and articles on Midi Z, his Facebook page, public talks and a book by him on his filmmaking (Zhao 2015), and my interviews with him in Taipei (5 October 2014) and with his mother in Lashio (3 November 2014).

²The Yunnanese Chinese migrants (hereafter Yunnanese migrants) referred to in this paper are Han Chinese. Midi Z refers to his ancestral roots in Nanjing, China. It is not clear when the first-generation ancestor arrived in Yunnan. According to Midi Z's mother, Midi Z's great-grandfather migrated from Yunnan to a border place named Hemonglong in northern Shan State of Burma. Around 1968 when the Communist Party of Burma penetrated the area, the family moved from Hemonglong to Lashio (my interview with Midi Z's mother).

great majority of the people in Burma, and most fellow migrants (prior to the mid-1990s), the family was destitute. Midi Z is the youngest child with four other siblings. His father, though an unlicensed medicine man, suffered from poor health. His mother thus provided the main economic support for the family—selling food on the street, helping cook at banquets, washing dishes in shops, washing clothes for other people and carrying mountain produce to the market for sale (Jiang 2014; my interview with Midi Z's mother). Only four years before my interview with her, the mother had stopped working. Midi Z recalled the living conditions of his childhood in an interview:

One year's total income was not even enough for buying a pair of Nike sneakers.... Our house was grass roofed with bamboo walls and dirt ground. Once it rained heavily, and the house collapsed.... The [one-room] house accommodated eight people—my grandfather, my parents and five kids. (Fang 2014:54).

Similar stories are commonly told among ordinary people in Burma. Job opportunities are scarce, and often one's labor does not make ends meet. Going to the jade mines in Hpakant and engaging in drug trafficking become two of the most popular means of obtaining wealth that numerous migrant Yunnanese youths risk their lives to pursue. Nevertheless, the reality is most of the time cruel rather than merciful, repeatedly leading to drug addiction and a range of diseases and illnesses, in particular AIDS (Chang 2014b; Hughes and Ward 1997; Levy and Scott-Clark 2001; Zhao 2015; Zhou 1996:298).

Poverty and a series of incidents pushed Midi Z to leave the country at 16 in search of a better education and future in Taiwan. However, the unbroken tie with Burma as his native homeland that predicated his connection with many family

members and friends still living there, has generated a deep sense of nostalgia and also an urge to tell stories. Despite impoverishment, life in Burma also evokes many beautiful memories for him, especially of experiences in nature. Images of snakes, baby tigers and other wild animals being sold in the market often recur in his memory. While Burma may seem mysterious to the people living in developed societies, dramatic events were part of his life. He was once mistakenly knifed, had two serious car accidents and was even imprisoned for three months with two other friends for possessing unlawful firearms—using a rifle while hunting (Zhao 2014b). These memories, entangled with deep love and despair, have never faded but have transformed into a creative force for his many short films and three movies on Burma. The movies are *Return to Burma* (2011), *Poor Folk* (2012) and *Ice Poison* (2014), all centered on the themes of poverty and migration.

In this paper, based on Midi Z's three movies, his life experiences and outlook, and my own understanding of Yunnanese migrants of Burma, I attempt to explore the issue of poverty and migration in Burma.³ More specifically, the paper does not aim to study poverty in the country from a macro-perspective by analyzing general political and economic indexes, tracing causal factors and providing concrete solutions. Instead, it looks at the poverty issue through a Burmese native director's films, to see how he portrays the lives of poor people from his community and the underlining cultural and structural features in relation to the socio-political scenarios of the country and Yunnanese migrant's culture of mobility. The questions addressed are: How does he deal with the question of poverty by looking at poor folk's lives? How do Midi Z's migration and living experiences

³I have researched Yunnanese migrants in Burma, Thailand, Taiwan, Yunnan, Hong Kong and Guangzhou since 1994, with a focus on their migration history and transnational trade (Chang 2014b).

abroad (Taiwan) impact his filmmaking? What are Yunnanese migrants' adaptive strategies in their everyday lives? Do their strategies lead them to overcome poverty, or is poverty a kind of destiny? Moreover, do we see a kind of perpetuating "culture of poverty," which Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966a), a pioneer in poverty studies, advocates, in Midi Z's films or in the real lives of Yunnanese migrants, or is the specter of poverty essentially attributed to structural inequality?

In the following sections, I begin by briefly reviewing Lewis's work, which I choose for a comparative analysis of Midi Z's movies. I select Lewis not only because he is a pioneer in the studies of the poor, but also because Midi Z's movies relate to Lewis's family-centered ethnographies characterized by a literary style. One of Lewis's books—*The Children of Sanchez* (1961)—was adapted into a Hollywood film; the premiere was shown on 16 November 1978, starring Anthony Quinn. Although criticized as essentializing the poor, Lewis's work has aroused continuous discussions on the role of culture and structure in anthropology. After reviewing Lewis, I enter Midi Z's life and work in relation to Yunnanese migration and livelihoods, and Burma's current socio-political scenarios. I depict Midi Z's lived experiences in Burma and abroad and look into his three movies. My comparative analysis between him and Lewis shows their similarities and differences in portraying poverty. While on the surface Midi Z's movies seem to resemble Lewis's advocacy for perpetuating the culture of poverty, since Midi Z's protagonists, like Lewis's, are constantly caught up in predicaments, the former touches on the aspect of structural inequality, which is lacking in the latter's work. Because Midi Z's exploration of poverty is more nuanced than Lewis's, and he has greater awareness of his own and other Yunnanese migrants' successful stories in their career pursuits, I suggest that the director does not intend to portray poverty as a perpetual culture in his movies; instead the movies

could be seen as a means to voice the poor's indictment against those in power.

“Culture Of Poverty” and Studies of the Poor

Oscar Lewis (1914-1970), an American anthropologist, began his research among poor people via a family-focused approach from the 1940s. By writing detailed and compelling stories of family lives, he succeeded in bringing the reader into the world of the poor in Mexico, Puerto Rico, New York and northern India (1951, 1959, 1961, 1964, 1966a). His theory of the poor is built on the concept of a “culture of poverty,” first introduced in *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, published in 1959, then further explicated in the introductions of two other books and a journal article (1961, 1966a, 1966b). However, the concept has also generated heated disputes, criticisms and even misuse.⁴ According to Lewis, the culture of poverty is “both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society” (1966a: xlv). In other words, it is a set of coping mechanisms in the face of harsh living conditions. Furthermore, Lewis stresses that it is not confined to the economic sphere, but includes a wide range of dimensions in life: material culture, social networks, familial relations, religious life, individual values and attitudes, and so on. Specifically, he says:

As an anthropologist I have tried to understand poverty and its associated traits as a culture or, more accurately, as a subculture with its own structure and rationale, as a way of life which is passed down from generation to generation along family lines. This view directs attention to the fact that the culture of poverty in modern nations is not only a

⁴A few good reviews of Lewis's work include: Bourgois (2001), Eames and Goode (1980), Small, Harding and Lamont (2010).

matter of economic deprivation, of disorganization or of the absence of something. It is also something positive and provides some rewards without which the poor could hardly carry on. (Lewis 1966a: xliii)

One essential feature mentioned here is the positive aspect in the culture that parallels what we often refer to today as individual agency, which helps generate adaptive strategies to deal with challenges in everyday life. In Lewis's work, we learn about his informants' struggle against poverty with loans via social networks or by taking a range of odd jobs at the same time. Wives and mothers shoulder the responsibility of housework, child rearing and food provision, and resort to local beliefs and religious practices for health or love. Some parents exert themselves to support their children's education, but while others do not. With their perseverance:

the lives of the poor are not dull. The stories... reveal.... an intensity of feeling and human warmth, a strong sense of individuality, a capacity for gaiety, a hope for a better life, a desire for understanding and love, a readiness to share the little they possess, and the courage to carry on in the face of many unresolved problems (1961: xii).

Such struggle is intermixed with agency and marginality among impoverished migrants moving internally from the countryside to cities or externally from an underdeveloped country to a developed country. In recognizing constant violence, suffering and deprivation among the poor, Lewis reveals his informants' hope and courage to fight against numerous odds.

Nevertheless, Lewis also essentializes his interpretation of the "culture of poverty," as he treats it as an unchanging value-system that perpetuates from generation to generation. He says:

By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities. (1966a: xlv)

This advocacy of intergenerational transmission and early childhood socialization is contrary to the ethos of a way of life constituting a set of adaptive strategies for survival while the poor interact with external environments (Eames and Goode 1980:276).

Furthermore, in contrast to the positive aspect mentioned above, Lewis underlines the feelings of despair, apathy and hopelessness, which lead to a kind of fatalism among the poor (1966a: xlix, li). He considers the culture of poor people a “relatively thin culture” (1966a: lii), and lists many negative traits pertaining to it (1966a xlvi-xlviii, 1998:9). He says:

There is a great deal of pathos, suffering and emptiness among those who live in the culture of poverty. It does not provide much support or long-range satisfaction and its encouragement of mistrust tends to magnify helplessness and isolation. Indeed, the poverty of culture is one of the crucial aspects of the culture of poverty. (1966a:lii)

Not only are his explanations unclarified, but they result in misinterpretation or even misuse of his studies. Some politicians tend to see the culture of poverty as the cause of poverty and not as its result. The battles against poverty in the US since the 1960s provide frequently quoted examples. Many poor and minority communities were involuntarily dislocated with the objective of “development” and removal of poverty (Wilson 1991; Zinn 1989).

Looking into the negative traits Lewis attaches to the poor, we discover that they constitute a mixture of different categories. Many of them actually belong to contextual problems, such as underemployment, unemployment, borrowing from local moneylenders, a low level of literacy and living in slums. However, neither Lewis's stories nor his theoretical discussions sufficiently explore the structural inequality that originates from external systems and causes problems due to marginal accessibility of education, jobs, housing and so on. Moreover, many negative behavior traits attributed to the poor, such as marriage instability, alcoholism, confusion over sexual identification, and early sexual initiation, are not confined only to the lower classes. Eames and Goode thus critique that many of the traits Lewis attributes to the poor are "contradictory, not testable, and negative in tone" (Eames and Goode 1980: 285) and they consider his poverty studies ethnocentric, grounded in the perspective of the American middle class (Eames and Goode: 278).

With regards to Lewis's theoretical limitation, many scholars have suggested counterbalancing it with investigation of structural contextualization (e.g., Bourgois 2001; Gajdosikiene 2004; Eames and Goode 1980; Stack 1974). Actually Lewis is aware of the difference in historical contexts from society to society; he distinguishes the proletariat's struggle in Algeria from the struggle among the low-income Puerto Ricans (1966a: 1). Nevertheless, he still essentializes his poverty-culture notion and does not perceive a sense of historical consciousness or class consciousness among the poor. He says:

People with a culture of poverty have very little sense of history. They are a marginal people who know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own way of life. (Lewis 1998: 7)

When the poor become class-conscious or active members of trade-union organizations, or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world, they are no longer part of the culture of poverty, although they may still be desperately poor. (Lewis1966a: xlviii)

Through deeply human and vivid stories, Lewis brings life to his informants and opens up a significant research field. His contributions are undeniable. However, in the face of a more complex, capitalistic and globalized world, his interpretation appears somewhat rigid and oversimplified. For people of the underdeveloped world, migration to wealthy countries has been a primary means to improve their lives. Their mobility through a range of countries, and experiences in multiple life situations have certainly strengthened their awareness of the discrepancy and inequality among people of and within different societies. Many authors in the field of migration have shed light on migrants' self-reflections on their transnationality and multiple experiences of discrimination as they connect with differences and inequality in culture, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Distinctively, Gloria Anzaldúa brings up "mestiza consciousness" (1987), Luis Guarnizo "transnational habitus" (1997), and Patricia Zavella "peripheral vision" (2011). Despite the above-mentioned shortcomings, Lewis's works remain useful for comparison and contrast. In reviewing Midi Z's movies and his filming career in the following sections, I will illustrate his similarities with and differences from Lewis's writings.

Midi Z—from Burma to Taiwan

Historically, Yunnanese from southwestern China have moved back and forth between Yunnan and its neighboring countries for either economic or political undertakings. Because of its contiguity with Yunnan, Burma in particular has been the major

recipient country for Yunnanese migration (Chen 1966; Forbes and Henley 1997; Hill 1998; Wang and Zhang 1993; Sun 2000; Yang 2008). The primary proportion of the Yunnanese migrants in Burma today are descendants of refugees fleeing Yunnan after the Chinese Communist Party took over China.⁵ Without legal status, most Yunnanese refugees first settled in rural Shan or Kachin States after arriving in Burma. They made a living by farming or small trade in local markets. In addition, many people, following their predecessors' engagement in long-distance mule caravan trade, joined the illegal venture to trade between Burma and Thailand mostly also by means of mule caravans during the socialist period (1962-1988) (Chang 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

Burma, an ethnically diverse country which gained its independence from British colonization in 1948, has long been politically divided. It was briefly governed by a parliamentary system (1948-1962), but from 1962 to early 2016, it was ruled by a series of military regimes.⁶ Even the quasi-civilian government, formed in March 2011, was closely connected with the Burmese military (Callahan 2003; Smith 1993; South 2008; Steinberg 2006; Tagliacozzo and Chang 2014; Thawngmung 2012; Wilson, ed. 2006). Continuous isolation, suppressive rule and policy mistakes severely set back the nation's economy, resulting in Burma's ranking as one of the poorest countries in the world, despite its rich natural resources. Except for a small portion of wealthy people, the great majority are the poor, living in the mire of

⁵There is no reliable population figure for the Yunnanese migrants in Burma. Estimates given by informants range from half a million to one million. The descendants of contemporary Yunnanese refugees may account as high as 80 percent.

⁶The new government under de facto leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi as the State Counsellor only commenced on April 6, 2016. Founded on civilian rule, it constitutes a political landmark in Burma's contemporary history. Yet, numerous social, political and economic problems are unlikely to be resolved within a short period of time.

numerous problems—lacking electricity, clean water, employment, education, health services, security, and so on.

During Thein Sein's rule (March 2011–March 2016), the government embarked upon a series of reforms, including infrastructure building, loosening of media and press control, release of political prisoners, and negotiations with ethnic armed groups for a ceasefire. Nevertheless, decades of old problems endured. Even today, wide stretches of rural areas are still marked as brown or black zones which bar foreigners.⁷ Under such circumstances, access to native voices from the subaltern class in remote areas remains very difficult and yet extremely precious. While some academics risk conducting covert research, some media and film workers are also secretly covering Burmese lives via their cameras and videos. Midi Z, a native Burmese director based in Taiwan, has shot 3 movies about Yunnanese migrants of Burma. Oriented in social realism, his movies transmit a native perspective about his country and its people, and have received much international attention in recent years. How has he cultivated his filming career?

In 1998 at 16, Midi Z came to Taiwan with US\$200, which his parents borrowed from friends and relatives. His wish to go to Taiwan has been embedded in his mind from childhood. Although separated by long distance, ethnic Chinese in Burma learn about Taiwan through satellite television. In a public talk, Midi Z mentioned watching Taiwan's annual Golden Horse Film Festival on television at a neighbor's house when he was still a kid, and dreaming about being among the audience someday (Zhao 2014a).⁸

⁷The Burmese government divides the country into three zones: the white zones, which are under the control of the Burmese army; the brown zones, which are contested areas; and the black zones where the Burmese army has no control.

⁸Not only do the ethnic Chinese know about Taiwan from satellite television, they also learn about China, other Southeast Asian countries and societies

Going to Taiwan for education is an enviable choice for many ethnic Chinese students in Burma (especially Yunnanese Chinese), and is considered an upward move.⁹ However, most of these students drop out of school after a few months or a couple of years of study, because they are not able to keep up their learning in addition to working and supporting themselves. Like other students from Burma, Midi Z had to make his own living in Taiwan. On the second day after his arrival, he started working at a construction site 20 stories high in order to earn his tuition fees and living costs. He worked part time at his school and in restaurants during semesters, and full time as a construction worker during vacations (Zhao 2014a; Zhao 2015). Despite his busy work life, Midi Z is one of the few among fellow Chinese students from Burma who completed graduate studies with a master's degree in industrial and commercial design.¹⁰

Coming to Taiwan was his first trip abroad, but he said he was not afraid at all. "I was very happy about going to Taiwan, because I realized I could make money there to improve my family's living conditions and even change my own fate.... My goal was to build a house for my family and repay all the debts" (Zhao 2014b). During his studies, he not only supported himself, but also saved 2 million Taiwanese dollars (about US\$67,000) by age 24, then still a graduate student, and built a house for his family in Lashio (Fang 2014:55). While at school he always earned excellent grades and received scholarships. Furthermore, he loved reading, and discovered that school libraries were like

further afield. Apart from television, telephone is another common means for connection. Both objects repeatedly appear in Midi Z's films.

⁹Prior to Midi Z's departure to Taiwan, his parents had spent about \$10,000 US dollars to go through many required procedures and acquire a passport for him. The money was in part from the remittances sent back by his siblings working in Thailand, and in part a loan from other people (Sun Zhixi 2014).

¹⁰Midi Z first went to a vocational high school to learn printing, then to the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology for undergraduate and graduate studies, majoring in design.

treasure houses, facilities he could hardly dream of in Burma. He read many literary works, including world classics, and he expressed his nostalgia for Burma, family members and friends by writing a diary and letters. He also posted essays to school journals to earn extra money. He said he was not interested in going to karaoke or nightclubs as many youth in Taiwan like to do (Fang 2014: 54; Zhao 2014a; my interview with Midi Z).

Midi Z learned moviemaking mainly by teaching himself. Since his undergraduate years, he had watched videotapes and read literary works whenever he had free time. He would decode and analyze every film he watched—its scenes, lenses, lighting, editing, special effects, sound effects, story and so on. Meanwhile he shot graduation and wedding videos for clients. His graduation short film for his undergraduate studies, “White Doves” (8' 39"), was selected for several international film festivals, including Busan International Film Festival, Copenhagen Film Festivals, and Australian International Film Festival.¹¹ After helping his family repay all debts and building a house for them, he thought seriously about his own future and reflected on what he would really like to do. He gave himself more free time to explore literature and the art of filmmaking. “I could watch 8 or 9 movies a day and read over 100 books a year,” he said (Fang 2014:55).

In interviews, he often stressed that his lived experiences in Burma and Taiwan have provided him with a comparative perspective and sources of creation for his moviemaking. Burma is his homeland, the foundation of his childhood that nourishes his roots and supplies endless stories for his movies. A reporter writes:

¹¹See <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%B6%99%E5%BE%B7%E8%83%A4> (access date: 24 September 2014).

Although life there lacked material comfort, frequent contacts in nature left happy memories.... The Buddhist ethos in Burma, its tranquility and tropical [force] has shaped [Midi Z's] artistic talents. In comparison, Taiwan has offered him technical training, taught him how to get along with people and educated him with needed knowledge.... [Both sources] are deeply engrained in him. (Xia 2014)

Midi Z in particular appreciates Taiwan's freedom and democracy, which motivates him to pursue his goals in literary creation and making movies. "If I had not come to Taiwan, I don't know what I would have been like, perhaps like the characters in my movies involved in drug trafficking," he said in an interview (Wang 2014). He lamented that "among his 70 classmates of the middle school, 30 of them are in drug business, 5 were caught and executed, 4 died in drug addiction and more than 10 are now in prison.... Drug trafficking is prevailing in Burma's borderlands. People risk their lives in this engagement because of poverty" (Xiang 2014). In rural areas, growing poppies is simply a way of making a living. Some people who do not own land live on commissions from drug delivery. To make money to buy rice, Midi Z's mother once carried drugs to another city. She was caught by the police on the way and imprisoned for 16 months. It was a tragedy for the family. Poverty tore the family to fall apart. His eldest brother left home for Hpakant as a jade miner, and two elder sisters and a brother went to Thailand as illegal migrant workers (Fang 2014:56; Zhao 2014a; author interview with the mother).

In contrast, life in Taiwan is quiet and peaceful. Yet, Midi Z constantly misses Burma where life was full of drama (Zhao 2014b). Making movies helps him release his desire for narration. "Through moviemaking, I return to the innocent age of my childhood and the endearment with my family and native land"

(Wang 2014). The desire to tell stories about Burma has been so powerful that despite lack of money, technical and logistic support, and the risks of secret filming, he has launched his shooting plans one after another, and has completed 3 movies; each one costing less than 1 million Taiwanese dollars (about US\$33,000) to produce.

The immediate positive responses from the audiences of Taiwan and beyond after the release of his first movie surprised him and confirmed that he had succeeded in communicating with people outside his native society, encouraging him to persist with his dream. As of 24 July 2014, his short films and 3 movies had been screened in 120 film festivals, and he himself had been invited to 35 countries (Zhao 2014b). His latest movie *Ice Poison* won Best Film at the 2014 Edinburg International Film Festival and Best Director at the 2014 Peace & Love Film Festival (Sweden).¹² Moreover, it was selected to represent Taiwan in the best foreign film category of the 2015 Oscars. These opportunities have put him in the spotlight as a talented and promising young director, and the Taiwanese media sometimes compare him with the world-famous Taiwanese-born director Ang Lee.

Midi Z's reflective thoughts highlight his awareness of and appreciation for the differences between Burma and Taiwan and their respective impacts upon him. This comparative perspective clearly differentiates him from Lewis who saw the poor as being "provincial and locally oriented" (Lewis 1966a:xlvi). In his works Lewis rivets attention on his research subjects' destitute lives and does not go further to explore their ideas on class inequality as he does not think they are capable of doing so.

¹²For the latter honor, the official statement says: "His direction was commendable for all aspects of the production from the casting of the luminescent Wu Ke-Xi to employing an unconventional *cine verita* style and shining a light on the brutal existence of an otherwise unknown culture, giving us a truly compelling story." See: <http://www.peaceandlovefilm.se/2014/06/plff-2014-award-winners/> (access date: 28 September 2014).

Being an outsider in terms of class and nationality from the people he studies, Lewis misses a critical dimension. In contrast, not only is Midi Z a native film maker, he himself belongs to the poor.

As mentioned above, we also find that this comparative outlook between the native homeland and host society exists commonly among immigrants in migration and cultural studies. Those who are compelled to escape their countries as refugees especially live in an interstitial state of mind, stranded in dislocation and exile. A captivating example is the autobiography by Pascal Khoo Thwe (2002)—*From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey*. The author was a student refugee from the Padaung minority in rural Shan state who participated in the 1988 student democracy movement. After escaping to a refugee camp in a border area of Thailand, he was helped to move to England for further education by a Cambridge University professor. Although granting him new prospects, a life of exile in the new country also entailed cultural shocks and longing for his family and former way of life. Not only did he face frustration in adapting himself to many strange living habits, he was constantly burdened by a kind of guilt for leaving his family members behind.¹³

Midi Z, though not a refugee, also expresses a kind of mixed feeling as a migrant in Taiwan. He says:

We often suffer anxiety and pain because of not being able to release our sudden urge to narrate. Even after completing a film, I have only temporarily discharged my narration desire. Forever pain and

¹³A few more good examples covering refugees in other parts of the world are Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (1998), Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Liisa H. Malkki's *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (1995), and Edward Said's *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999).

happiness coexist, and therefore, our craving for narration persists. (Midi Z' Facebook page, 27 August 2014)¹⁴

Furthermore, an ambiguous feeling regarding his self-identification always haunts him. He stresses that he has spent half of his life in Burma and half in Taiwan. While acknowledging his ancestral roots in Nanjing (before coming to Yunnan), he questions where his original homeland is. He writes:

Forever I miss Burma in Taiwan, and while returning to Burma I miss Taiwan. Ever since we were little, grandpa reminded us that our roots are in China.... Because of contingent factors, Chinese overseas have to keep on moving. (Zhao 2015:35)

This mixed feeling, while generating a liminal and even painful state of mind, is also a force of creation that nourishes Midi Z's narrativity, predicating his filming career. For him, moviemaking is his way of telling life stories and is also a means to explore his own sentiments (Zhao 2015:16). In his book, he says moviemaker is like a storyteller, with the essential concern for human existence instead of filming techniques (Zhao 2015: 222). Based on this belief, his movies have tried to present the life-world of his fellow folk, their persistent struggle against a series of constrained contexts.

Midi Z's Movies

Drawing on stories familiar to him or even his own experiences, Midi Z makes movies about his own people. He wrote the scripts for his three movies, which all center on the subaltern class of the Yunnanese migrants of Burma, and his actors are primarily fellow Yunnanese and non-professionals. Prior to the mid-1990s,

¹⁴<https://www.facebook.com/ffe.tw?fref=photo> (access date: 1 Sept 2014).

RETURN TO BURMA

A film by MIDI Z

歸來的人



Where should we go? Anywhere but here.



Produced by SEASHORE IMAGE PRODUCTIONS MONTAGE FILM in association with FLASH FORWARD ENTERTAINMENT
Executive Producer: Peter Chan, Producer: MIDI Z, Executive Producer: PETER CHAN, HUNG HING, Executive Producer: AUSTIN LAU, SUN CHUN WANG
Production Manager: WANG FU-RANG, Production Designer: LIU JIUN, Assistant Director: NGI HO-BO, Location Manager: SHENGLIANG LI, SHENG YEN, GUY MIDI Z, LIN SHENG WEN, Assistant Director: NGI HO-BO

SEASHORE IMAGE PRODUCTIONS

MONTAGE FILM

FLASH FORWARD ENTERTAINMENT

Figure 1: Return to Burma (Courtesy of Flash Forward Entertainment)

the majority of Yunnanese migrants in Burma lived in poverty; most of them were farmers, laborers, small traders and muleteers. Even today, although many Yunnanese migrants living in cities have become affluent in business, those living in small towns or rural areas are generally market vendors, small- or medium-level merchants. The ones who remain in the mountains and do not have family members working abroad still lead a difficult life. Grounded in the trend of social realism, Midi Z projects the real lives of his people in his films characterized by poignant stories and natural acting. As works on the everyday lives of different ethnic groups in Burma are still few (e.g., Chang and Tagliacozzo, ed. 2014; Rosalind Russell 2015; Russell 2014; Skidmore 2004), his movies provide a unique window for the audiences of the world interested in this formerly isolated country to learn about a small part of Burma.

Midi Z's first movie, *Return to Burma* (Figure 1), released in 2011, is about a Burmese migrant worker who returns to Burma after working in Taiwan for several years. The main character brings an urn containing a fellow friend's ashes back home with him. That friend worked with him at the same construction site, but died from an accidental fall while working extra hours at night before the Chinese New Year. Sharply contrasting industrial Taiwanese society and Burma in the opening scenes, the movie underlines this returnee's strong sense of alienation with his family, friends, and Burmese society against a backdrop of rampant poverty. The second movie, *Poor Folk* (Figure 2), released in 2012, comprises 3 connected episodes, exposing problems of drug and human trafficking that trap many illegal Burmese migrants soon after they arrive in Thailand. These migrants carry hopes and risk their lives to cross the border for a better life, but only find themselves facing cruel realities that end tragically. The third movie, *Ice Poison* (Figure 3), released in 2014, follows the 2 story lines of a young man and a young

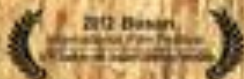
POOR FOLK

a film by Miori Z.

窮人。榴槤。麻藥。偷渡客



HUBERT BALS
FUND



2012 Busan



2012 Hawaii



Produced by SEASHORE IMAGE PRODUCTIONS MONTAGE FILM PRODUCTIONS in association with FLASH FORWARD ENTERTAINMENT
Directed by WANG SHEN-HONG, WU KE-XI, ZHAO DE-FU, ZHENG MANG-LAN
Executive Producers: PATRICK MAO HSIANG
Producers: ASTER LAW SUN CHUN-WANG LEE LI-FONG
Production Designers: WANG FU-ANG, ZHAO DE-FU, ZHENG MANG-LAN
Casting Director: LIN SHENG-WEN
Cinematographer: CHOU CHENG
Editor: BONIC DEADHORSE
Production Office: LIN SHENG-WEN, MIOI Z
Post-Production: PIXELFLY DIGITAL EFFECTS Co., Ltd.

星洲影視製作有限公司

閃電向前娛樂有限公司

星洲影視製作有限公司

Figure 2: Poor Folk (Courtesy of Flash Forward Entertainment)

woman, a farmer and someone tricked into marriage in China. The young man's father mortgages a cow to a relative for a used motorcycle in order to help his son become a motorcycle taxi driver in Lashio. The young woman returns home from China for her grandfather's funeral and meets the young man. Out of poverty and a wish for a better future, they are lured into the drug trade and also become drug addicts. After briefly enjoying the happiness of obtaining some quick money with beautiful expectations, both the man and woman sadly are doomed to fall into a trap—the woman is caught by the police and the man becomes insane.

Because of a shortage of financial support, Midi Z shot the first movie with a crew of 3 people (including himself), the second one of 4 people and the third one of 7 people (Zhao 2014a). Moreover, owing to subject sensitivity, each movie was secretly filmed within a short period of time, ranging from between 10 to 20 days (Wang 2013; Zhao 2014b).¹⁵ The director knew that each movie had to be completed in a single trip, as he did not have the money to return and re-shoot any missing or imperfect parts. In addition, it would have likely aroused attention from the local police or military men, a dangerous situation (Sun Shuo 2014; Zhao 2014b).

What was his process as he filmed these movies? In an interview, he told me that for years he kept a diary, sometimes just jotting down random thoughts, a dialogue or an event, other times writing a more complete short story based on personal or friends' experiences. With an accumulation of connected plots, he develops them into a movie script threaded by a range of scenes. The core of the story embodies his thoughts and state of mind. He said:

¹⁵The first and third films are located in northern Burma and the second one primarily in a border village of northern Thailand. It is unlikely that a request to film stories of poverty or other social problems would result in an official permit (He 2012; Michaels 2014; author's interview with Midi Z).

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Figure 3: Ice Poison (Courtesy of Flash Forward Entertainment)

Even before shooting, I have already sensed the atmosphere of each scene and my characters' emotions.... However, you don't know what will happen while shooting. You cannot fix all the details.... Many uncertainties may occur.... You have to be dynamic and able to handle unexpected incidents. (my interview with Midi Z)

Once while he was filming on the street, the police showed up. Immediately, he had to switch his camera from filming to still picture-taking, pretending to be a tourist. Moreover, apart from a couple of main actors whom he decided on beforehand,¹⁶ he needed to look to local people for actors after arriving on location. To help these amateur actors immerse themselves in acting, he listened to their stories and ideas and allowed them to improvise their conversations, guided by a script outline, thereby applying some techniques of documentary filming.

To enhance the movies' realism, Midi Z also integrates current events into his movies. This is most clearly demonstrated in his first movie set in early 2011, right after the national election at the end of 2010. The movie depicts the returnee's prospects in Burma, while sarcastically illustrating ongoing problems in daily life, such as electricity blackouts, unemployment and contraband trade between China and Burma. A mixture of hope and disillusionment are projected via Burmese songs based on political propaganda, characters' conversations about Burma and low wages, and an unknown

¹⁶The main male actor in his three movies, Wang Xing-Hong, is his childhood friend. Wang also went to Taiwan for studies and has settled there. The main female actor in his second and third movies, Wu Ke-Xi, is a professional actress from Taiwan. (There is no leading female actor in his first film.) Midi Z demanded that Wu learn Yunnanese beforehand, and sent her to live among the Yunnanese migrants in northern Thailand and upper Burma respectively for a month prior to the shooting of the two movies.

future overshadowing the main character when he explores several economic possibilities: opening an electric appliances shop, driving a scooter taxi and participating in the jade trade. At the end of the movie, he is cutting wood with a friend, and his younger brother is leaving for Malaysia as a migrant worker with another friend. This ending suggests the continuation of existent problems and grueling living conditions that keep haunting the poor.

Is poverty then a kind of destiny? Are the poor in Burma trapped by a “culture of poverty” as Lewis suggests, which obstructs any relief from their destitute lives? At first glance, Midi Z’s movies look much like Lewis’s stories in terms of taking a family-centered approach and conveying a kind of fatalistic tone by stressing the feelings of despair and hopelessness of the poverty-stricken in the face of ongoing adversity. In addition, while one uses written texts and the other films to portray poor people’s lives, both media delineate the characters’ miseries with graphic and gripping effects, transmitting a similar literary milieu. Neither Lewis nor Midi Z target certain readership or audience (such as academics or artists), but aim their works toward the general public. Unlike many ethnographies that are underpinned by abstruse theories and academic jargons, Lewis presents his research subjects’ lives in literary genres—short stories and novels. Comparatively, Midi Z, who is a literature lover, implicitly draws analogies between the lives of his characters and those in Rabindranath Tagore’s, Gao Xingjian’s and Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy’s works in his first and second films.¹⁷

However, comparing Midi Z’s movies with Lewis’s writings carefully, we see essential differences. First of all, as mentioned earlier, Lewis perceives the culture of poor people as a “relatively thin culture” (1966a: lii), and lists many negative traits

¹⁷Specifically, Midi Z refers to Gao’s *One Man’s Bible*, Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon* and Tolstoy’s “Poor People.”

pertaining to it (1966a: xlvi-xlviii, 1998:9). Contrary to this viewpoint, Midi Z portrays in his movies a rich culture among his folk that embodies strong family ties, devotion to traditions and functional social connections. In particular, we see the effort of his characters in observing traditional Yunnanese customs in Burma, particularly shown in the scenes of the Chinese New Year celebration in *Return to Burma* and of death rituals in *Ice Poison* (further discussion in the next section). Secondly, Lewis addresses many negative traits of the poor without discerning their differences in nature and also their connection with external social, economic and political mechanisms. Consequently, this led him to overlook the aspect of structural inequality. In contrast, Midi Z's movies, characterized by a force of rage, provide a critical perspective on how social structures, whether in Burma or societies of immigration, generate influences on the lives of Yunnanese migrants against the backdrop of a more complex, capitalistic and globalized world than that of Lewis's day. In all his 3 movies Midi Z distinctively illustrates his characters' awareness of and dealings with the problem of unemployment.

In *Return to Burma*, a recurrent topic in the conversations between the main character and his family and friends centers on the salary difference between labor work in Taiwan and Burma; the former is ten times higher than the latter. However, a laborer belongs to the underclass in both societies. Even after working several years in Taiwan, the main character is unable to save much money to help his family or start a business. In *Poor Folk* and *Ice Poison*, poverty pushes people to migrate illegally and engage in drugs and human trafficking. Both films powerfully display the violence generated from structural inequality, resulting in death, prostitution and insanity. In *Poor Folk*, even the poor exploit one another. For example, a young Burmese prostitute of Yunnanese descent in Bangkok participates in

human trafficking in an attempt to obtain legal documents via the smuggling syndicate she works for in order to go to Taiwan. She helps the syndicate escort illegal female migrants from northern Thai borders to Bangkok. When a teenage girl sold by her family tries to escape, she captures her without mercy. Furthermore, in *Ice Poison*, the director uses contrasting metaphors of a cow and a motorcycle, respectively symbolizing agricultural economy and capitalistic economy, to reflect structural inequality. At the end of the movie, the main female character, a young woman, is caught by the police while delivering drugs, and the young man who sends her there by motorcycle, though escaping from the police, becomes insane from fear and drug addiction. The cow, which the young man's father pawned for the motorcycle, is slaughtered, because the father cannot redeem his mortgage. The blood streams down from the cow's throat and the animal dies helplessly, a cruel and shocking scene, which also hints at the death or loss of the agricultural economy and the poor in Burma.

An unknown future or a tragic ending in Midi Z's movies seems to indicate unhappy destinies for the poor, parallel to Lewis's advocacy of a portrayal of poor people as doomed, rooted in a perpetuating culture of poverty. Nevertheless, Midi Z's movies are more than mere depictions of his impoverished folk's misfortunes. Rather than presenting a perpetuating culture of poverty in his movies, the director underlines an embedded discourse that points to structural inequality as the primary cause of poverty. From 1962 to 2011 Burma was controlled by a military junta; even during Thein Sein's period, people still lived under military rule and political division. The director reveals this situation best in *Return to Burma* by using two mocking scenes. In one, a friend of the main character greets the former from behind by holding a toy gun to his head, mocking a shooting (Figure 4). In another scene, a group of children play at

gun fighting. At the end of the game, the children all play dead on the ground. The mimic of gunplay suggests ethnic conflicts and military violence in Burma. In addition to political unrest, decades of policy mistakes, gross mismanagement and prevailing corruption have resulted in economic failure. While reforms have benefitted a tiny population keen to exploit new opportunities, the majority suffer from the speedy rise of daily living expenses. The gap between the poor and the rich is accelerating (Zhao 2015:126-128). Leaving the country remains a common strategy for the poor to escape poverty.¹⁸ In his book the director voices his criticism against Burma's "wild" situation that he attributes to a structural impasse:

Without democracy and a good legal system, Burmese society is like a wild world. The rich and the privileged ones take advantage of the poor. Men abuse women, and stronger women exploit weaker women. In the face of such a cruel reality, either you accept it or you run away to another society and look for new chances. (Zhao 2015: 80)

Living in this distressing environment, Midi Z's characters are, however, not at all passive. They have tried hard to improve their lives. They compare and explore different possibilities,

¹⁸Appalling news about Burmese illegal migrants abroad is common. In April 2008, 54 migrant workers died by suffocation in the back of a freezer truck to in southern Thailand <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/11/burma.thailand> (accessed 17 April 2015). About 550 enslaved fishermen were found on a far-flung Indonesian island in April 2015, and more than 200 are identified as Burmese, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/asia/number-of-slaves-found-on-indonesian-island-at-almost-550.html?print=1> (accessed 17 April 2015). Sites of mass graves of Rohingya Muslims were found in Southern Thailand earlier this year. These people were starved to death or killed by human traffickers who demanded ransoms from these destitute migrants' families in Burma, see <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/01/thailand-mass-graves-rohingya-found-trafficking-camp> (accessed date: 19 May 2015).



Figure 4: Greeting with a gun in *Return to Burma* (Courtesy of Flash Forward Entertainment)

discuss which foreign country is best to go to—Taiwan, China, Malaysia or Thailand—and respectively what each one's cost and benefits are. Moreover, they are even willing to risk their lives in illicit ventures. The director said:

They always want to move upward and don't simply succumb to their environment.... In their mind, they are aware of class differentiation, although they may not use the term. They see some jobs are easier and make more money than labor work, and some lifestyles are more comfortable.... They want to make a change of their lives and break through structural confinements, although this is very difficult. (my interview with Midi Z)

Like numerous migrant workers in different parts of the world, Midi Z's characters continue to encounter exploitation abroad, but their transnational experiences have sharpened their awareness of class differentiation. This differs from Lewis who denied a sense of historical consciousness or class consciousness among the poor (Lewis 1998: 7, 1966a: xlvi). In the next section I further explore this sense among Yunnanese migrants in relation to their alochtonous status in Burma, and discuss the dialectical impacts of culture and structure on poverty.

Yunnanese Migrants in Burma

Yunnanese have been mobile throughout their history. Combined with their economic agency, the long-distance caravan trade was a distinctive undertaking among the people for centuries. While researching the history of Yunnanese migration to Burma, I often hear the older generation, especially those from the border areas of Yunnan, recall a family history of cross-border trade back and forth between Yunnan and Burma

over several generations. Many of these people were muleteers or petty traders, and their narrations reflect a deep historical sense of their predecessors' migration to Yunnan and Burma, their own commercial disposition and knowledge about local political structures (Chang 2014b). Their ongoing movement has in practice carried on the tradition of Yunnanese mobility.

While taking on some Burmese living habits, Yunnanese migrants have largely maintained their own lifestyle—in education, religious life, and diet.¹⁹ A strenuous effort the Yunnanese migrants made was to organize Chinese education for the next generation, even under extreme circumstances (Chang 2014b). They founded Chinese schools or provided tutoring for the children. Even during the socialist period when ethnic education was banned, Yunnanese migrants managed to sustain Chinese education secretly in many places. Chinese schools prevail in upper Burma today, especially in Shan State.²⁰ While the rural

¹⁹As a migrant group, Yunnanese migrants' lifestyles illustrate some signs of hybridity. They mostly speak Yunnanese among themselves, but often mix in some Burmese words. Prior to the 1990s, wearing *longyi* (a sarong-like skirt commonly worn by both men and women in Burma) was common among them. Informants explained it as a way to play down their Chinese ethnicity. But following the economic opening and relaxation of political control, the Yunnanese migrants (both men and women) have by and large changed back to trousers. There is a traditional proverb among the Yunnanese, making fun of Burmese manner of dress—*yiwuling kuwudang* (衣無領褲無襠 shirts without collars and trousers without crotches)—as barbarian. In terms of food, while their diet is essentially Yunnanese, occasionally they also eat curry and drink black tea. Regarding religious life, they tend to go to Chinese temples, but some people nowadays also go to Burmese temples. In short, although fundamentally a Yunnanese lifestyle, hybrid features also exist.

²⁰Generally speaking, the maritime Chinese, i.e., the Fujian (Fujianese) and Guangdong (Cantonese), are mostly concentrated in urban areas of lower Burma and have much assimilated to Burmese society because of strict political control in these areas. In contrast, the overland Chinese, i.e., the Yunnanese, have primarily settled in upper Burma and maintained a strong ethnic identity and tradition. Using a religious pretext to obtain a permit, they have managed to register Chinese schools as Buddhist or Confucian schools.

areas only offer a primary school level, cities and towns provide learning in Chinese schools up to the middle school level or even high school. Going to Taiwan or China for further education or work thus offers the younger generation a possibility to escape poverty in Burma. In addition, many Yunnanese migrants also go to Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore and work at Chinese and Taiwanese owned companies or local Chinese restaurants. Like Midi Z, they send remittances home to help other family members or to build a house for them.

Modern transportation and electronic media in a globalized world have greatly impacted migrants' lives as well as those of their family members in the home society. During the time of Midi Z's grandparents, long-distance travel between China and Burma was still primarily dependent on horses or on foot (by land), and by boat (by sea), but usage of vehicles and airplanes has become commonplace today. Electronic contacts via phone, Skype, e-mail and Facebook have in effect enhanced connection between friends and family members living in different countries. Apart from illustrating adherence to a traditional lifestyle among the migrant Yunnanese of Burma, Midi Z includes features of hybridity in his movies, and skillfully uses contrasting metaphors to highlight socio-economic inequality between different places in a globalized world dominated by capitalism and the impacts of structural changes on the poor as analyzed earlier.²¹

Because of ongoing warfare in rural areas from the 1970s onwards, a large number of Yunnanese migrants have moved from the frontiers or mountainous regions to cities and towns in order to establish a more stable life. Some of them have made further migration abroad for work or for education. Be they in

²¹This aspect is most evident in *Return to Burma*. While presenting a basically Yunnanese lifestyle with reference to food, healing and Chinese New Year celebration, the director also includes some Burmese elements in their daily life, such as singing Burmese songs and going to Burmese tea shops.

Burma or abroad, their ongoing movement has resulted in mixed feelings regarding their self-identification, as Midi Z confesses (quoted above). Burdened with economic demands in everyday life, this feeling is constantly entangled with worries and anxieties, and further generates a sense of alienation towards environments. This sense of alienation permeates Midi Z's movies (especially in *Return to Burma*), reflecting his characters' ill adjustment or resistance to a range of environments to which they are subjected. Moreover, it affects Yunnanese migrants' interaction with people of other ethnic groups. Referring to his community's alochtonous status, Midi Z points out that most Yunnanese in Burma seclude themselves from local society, and regard themselves as superior to other groups in terms of culture and economic talents. Their ethnocentrism has consequently compounded their alien status, contributing to local people's accusation that Yunnanese economically exploit the country (Zhao 2015:37-38; my interview with Midi Z).

However, another side of the story is that immigrants and ethnic minorities are commonly discriminated against in Burma, especially in terms of citizenship, education and business. Burmanization was a dominant ideology for former military regimes' governance, as it has always been among most Burmans, the ethnic majority (Berlie 2008; Brown 2013; Gravers 2007; Turnell 2009). The communal conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists in several places in recent years are illustrative examples. Over the years I have also heard my informants recall that prior to 1990 ethnic Chinese were easily abused by local officials and policemen. The latter frequently carried out house searches at night without advance notice. They sometimes created false accusations to jail people in order to make monetary demands. Both Midi Z and his mother also made the same complaint in my interviews with them.

Despite their allochthonous status, many urban Yunnanese migrants, especially those residing in Mandalay and Yangon, have grabbed opportunities, expanded their investments and become wealthy merchants after the military junta's shift to a market-oriented economy in 1988. They live in grand houses, go to expensive restaurants and drive fancy cars. As a result, they have incited discontent from the local population who accuse them of conducting illegal trade with the aid of cronyism with military officers (Min Zin 2012; Mya Maung 1994). What does Midi Z think about these rich fellow Yunnanese? In my interview with him, he admitted the sharp contrast between the *nouveau riche* among the Yunnanese migrants and the impoverished folks of his movies. Most of the affluent Yunnanese are in the jade trade, construction business, restaurant business, tourism, transportation, import and export trade, and so on. Midi Z said Burmese laws are complex and change from time to time. On account of Burma's political division and the question of the ruling regime's legitimacy, legality is ambiguous. Most of the Yunnanese migrants, especially the older generation, do not know Burmese laws and are not able to speak Burmese well. They are often the targets of extortion by the police and customs officials. Whenever this happens, they have to bribe them or seek help from high-ranking officers. In effect, they have strengthened the practice of bribery and cronyism.

These contextual problems referred to here echo the question of structural inequality discussed in the previous section. But apart from structural factors, does culture also play a role in people's livelihoods? I asked the director about his viewpoint regarding Yunnanese mobility and engagement in the long-distance caravan trade throughout history. He affirmed its influence and thought that this tradition has contributed to an intrepid disposition among the Yunnanese.

It is a kind of survival instinct. The Yunnanese are unlike the maritime Cantonese or Fujianese who mostly seek a stable livelihood by opening a shop... The Yunnanese are tough. Some of them are so tough that they do not bother about ethical considerations. (Author's interview with Midi Z)

The director mentioned the late drug warlords such as Luo Xinghan and Khun Sa, and compared them to Mafia leaders in New York. He said that among the caravan traders, some were bandits and preyed on other traders. His great-great-grandfather in Yunnan was a wealthy landlord but was robbed by 3 caravan traders who had helped the family transport raw opium for several years.

I have heard many stories about how people behave like animals, killing one another, because of poverty.... Nevertheless, most poor folk like my mother are very simple.... (Author's interview with Midi Z)

Comparatively, my informants have also commented on this intrepid disposition with 2 general explanations: the first is positively related to the Yunnanese risk-taking nature in the face of adversity; the other is negatively related to a survival instinct such as the director mentioned. The essential difference seems to be one of degree. As far as I understand the long-distance caravan trade, by necessity it had to be organized and disciplined, with clear division of labor and recognition of traditional taboos (Ma 1985; Wang and Zhang 1993; Hu 1999). These were perilous journeys which would have been impossible without the caravan traders' respectful acknowledgment of local people and their ways (Chang 2009; Giersch 2006; Hill 1998). This reciprocity between traders and residents enabled this long tradition, "the culture of mule caravan trade" (*mabang wenhua* 馬

幫文化) (Wang and Zhang 1993), to endure, due to consistent interaction with structural factors, socio-political and economic. In other words, the culture of mule caravan trade corresponded with contingent structural factors, and the latter were incorporated into the former as time passed. In practice, the cultural and structural factors evolved in a dialectical relationship, and one may not draw a clear distinction between them.

Midi Z's movies also touch on the role of culture in his fellow folk's daily lives as discussed earlier. Significantly, it is underpinned by some traditional values, in particular filial piety and familism. Contrary to Lewis's concept of poverty culture, the observance of Yunnanese tradition or values does not relate to one's economic status. For example, in *Ice Poison*, although the funeral of the young woman's grandfather is simple (Figure 5), the young woman makes an effort to go to Yunnan and bring back the grandfather's shroud, which he had prepared earlier. After several decades, the shroud has become a pile of rags, but the young woman's and the whole family's devotion to following the tradition is revealing. Another example is from *Poor Folk*. The brother participates in drug trafficking in order to make money to redeem his sister who has been sold to a smuggling syndicate (Figure 6). At the end the brother is killed by a drug mafia leader. Sadly, the young sister is actually sold by the family because of their poverty. Therefore, the observance of the traditional values may result in tremendous personal sacrifice.

Midi Z said he does not have a theory about poverty; he has simply attempted to record his folk's living conditions via movies. His basic theme is pessimistic, as he thinks the poor can hardly hold their own against globalism and capitalism, and the military control in Burma will not end soon (author's interview with Midi Z). One may question Midi Z's viewpoint and argue that many urban Yunnanese in Burma have progressed econom-



Figure 5: A scene of death ritual in Ice Poison (Courtesy of Flash Forward Entertainment)

ically or even become wealthy in the last two decades and that he that he himself is a successful case. Although this argument may sound valid, fluctuation of wealth among the rich in Burma is not a normal phenomenon. While some people may gain wealth easily, their business may also go bust quickly because of sudden policy change, extortion or confiscation by the authorities, confidence games and so on. In other words, the flawed economic and political structures of the country do not guarantee stability for its people's economic development. Even a business based on cronyism with high-ranking officials may topple when a shift in the military or government takes place. The closing of two private banks, Myanmar Mayflower Bank and Asia Wealth Bank, owned by ethnic Chinese are good examples.²² In addition, I have heard many stories among my informants about the ups and downs of their fortunes. On the other hand, in the case of Midi Z or other Burmese migrants abroad, their success is connected more with the societies of their residence than with Burma. Accordingly, poverty should not be seen as a destiny of doom for the poor. When a society is able to provide better structural assistance, its people will have more chances to develop their potential. Although Midi Z's movies convey a pessimistic outlook, its projection is not founded on a fatalistic conviction among the impoverished. Rather, with the director's criticism of Burma and his awareness of what Taiwan, a democratic society, has provided him, it would be better to perceive his movies as a means to voice the marginals' accusations against the powerful in Burma.

In summary, taking Lewis's concept of poverty culture as a point of reference for exploration of the issue of poverty and migration via Midi Z's movies and his own life history, we see some similarities as well as essential differences. The core

²²These two banks were accused of having connections to drug syndicates and helping them launder money.



Figure 6: Drug trade in Poor Folk (Courtesy of Flash Forward Entertainment)

finding is that in contrast with Lewis's stress on a poverty culture, Midi Z emphasizes more structural factors, but underlying this is his attention to the role of culture. In terms of adherence to Yunnanese tradition, there is no essential difference between the poor and the rich. The mere difference may be in a material sense—the degree of luxury. Instead of trying to perceive or reconstruct a poverty culture among the subaltern Yunnanese migrants or the poor in any society, it may be more important to explore how both structure and culture have made an impact on their lives, bearing in mind that there is no clear distinction between these two aspects. In addition, although this paper does not aim to provide concrete solutions, grounded on the analysis given above, we may affirm that poverty alleviation in Burma fundamentally requires betterment of its political and economic structures—moving towards a more democratic framework and a stable economic order—and also a good understanding and respect for each ethnic group's culture and people's livelihoods.

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