



Celebrity humanitarianism and the popular geopolitics of hope along the Thai-Burma border



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ABSTRACT

In June of 2014 Angelina Jolie, actress and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Goodwill Ambassador, visited camps—home to 130,000 Burmese exiles—along the Thai-Burma border to draw international attention to one of the most protracted displacement situations in the world. Her fourth trip to the border since 2002, Jolie's day-long visit was widely commended in popular media. I draw on ethnographic research among Burmese exiles in northern Thailand to argue that the popular geopolitics of hope she engendered is constituted through contradictory impulses of, on one hand, her signification of global capital and the concurrent widespread geoeconomic hope around Burma's deepening integration into global capitalism, and on the other, the far-reaching geopolitics of fear that has materialized around the threat of repatriation resulting from rapid political-economic change in Burma. Thus, this paper builds on recent work in popular geopolitics and geographies of emotion and affect to offer a grounded illustration of the micro-macro linkages between popular culture and everyday geopolitical experience, as well as the often politically nuanced role of celebrities in humanitarian interventions. This paper contributes to ongoing conversations around the relationship between celebrity humanitarians from the global North and the political-economic implications of the affective enrollment of their intended benefactors from the global South.

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1. Introduction

In celebration of World Refugee Day in June of 2014, UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie visited several refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Part of her efforts to draw attention to ongoing human rights abuses in Burma, her day-long visit attracted international media coverage and was applauded by UNHCR for the worldwide attention it drew. Since 2002 Jolie has made four visits to camps in the border area—home to approximately 130,000 Burmese exiles (Myint-U, 2011; Rogers, 2012; UNHCR, 2013). Representing one of the longest lasting displacement situations in the world, the nine refugee camps—officially referred to by UNHCR as temporary shelters—along the Thai-Burma border have been in operation since the 1980s (Callahan, 1996; Fink, 2001; Hyndman, 2002; UNHCR, 2013; Vogler, 2007). Recent reports of Rohingya Muslims—described by the U.N. as the most persecuted minority in the world—trapped on boats in the Andaman Sea has increased international attention to ongoing violence in the country. The

lifting of sanctions and the opening up of Burma to global capital since 2011 has generated widespread geoeconomic hope for the region as well as subdued many of the continued human rights issues in the country. Recent media attention to the Rohingya crisis has contributed to widespread critiques of Nobel Peace Prize recipient and the leader for the National League for Democracy Party,¹ Aung San Suu Kyi.² Despite the continued influx of Burmese exiles entering Thailand, including the persecuted Rohingya, UNHCR cancelled its refugee registration program in 2005. These silences are periodically punctuated by popular media attention to Jolie as well as other international celebrities such as Matt Dillon³ and celebrity journalists such as Nicholas Kristoff.⁴ In 2014, the group resettlement program to the U.S.—by far the largest

¹ c.f. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35868579> Accessed 22 March 2016.

² c.f. <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2016/09/muslims-rail-harvard-suu-kyi-named-humanitarian-year/> Accessed 27 September 2016.

³ c.f. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-33143909> Accessed 2 February 2015.

⁴ c. f. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/06/16/opinion/nicholas-kristof-myanmar-documentary.html?_r=0 Accessed 10 October 2016.

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resettlement program along the border—was also cancelled. Today, Burmese exiles living in the border camps are caught in a constant state of limbo where they risk their lives if they return to Burma and arrest if they venture outside of their zones of restriction in Thailand. The Karenni phrase, “Chuwa ma yeh, ga ma ye” or “difficult to move forward, difficult to go back” (Banki & Lang, 2008), reflects widespread sentiments among Burmese refugees in the border area. Living in and constituting geographies of dispossession and exceptionalism, as well as the “violence of everyday life” (Hengsuwan, 2013, p. 109), Burmese exiles exist in spaces “imagined and administered as somehow beyond the reach of justice” (Sparke, 2007a, p. 339). Burmese exiles continue to be forced off their land because of ethnic, religious and/or political affiliations, while the U.S. and other western allies progressively lift economic sanctions on the country. With a ranking of 181 out of 183 countries in the Corruption Perception Index, recent reports note: “The Heavy Cost of Business,” and “Dangerous Optimism” in Burma.⁵ For Burmese exiles living in Thailand, there is a widespread fear that large-scale foreign investment in the country will result in their forced repatriation. It is in this highly precarious context that Jolie's sojourns to the Thai-Burma border have taken place, and the geopolitical implications of which have yet to be fully worked out.

Over the past five decades, the historical geopolitics of the Thai-Burma borderlands and geographies of violence among Burmese refugees have complicated ongoing efforts to reach political stability in one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia (Ekeh & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2010, p. 215). In a push for “national unity,” the Myanmar armed forces (Tamadaw) has forcibly displaced “hundreds of thousands of villagers and civilians within the border zones inhabited by so-called ‘national minorities’” (Grundy-Warr & Wong Siew Yin, 2002, 93). The shifting everyday experience along the border has been driven by the changing geopolitical context of Burma (Lang, 2002; Van der Stouwe & Oh, 2008). As Lamb points out, border residents, in collaboration with other government and non-governmental actors, participate in “border work” whereby they become enrolled in the co-production of the border through knowledge, practices and performances (2014). Lamb's study of borders “from the bottom up” is instructive in how it illustrates the ways in which borders are both remade through everyday micro-geographies of experience. Lang (2002) has similarly shown how, like border residents, rather than fixed in time, refugee regimes, rearticulate within the broader political-economic context in which they exist. In a related way, Horstman examines indigenous refugee networks along the Thai-Burma border and argues that rather than passive recipients of humanitarian assistance, refugees in the region use cultural capital to actively recruit religiously mediated solidarity networks within an international imagined community of Christians (Horstmann, 2011a, 2011c). Tangseefa (2006) has similarly questioned the closure of the political through her examination of Karen identity along the border. She shows how the Karens, one of the largest refugee groups in the border area (Rajah, 2002; South, 2007), are not frozen or fixed in time, but rather, reenact their identities which are strategically essentialized (Spivak) and “contingent on the performative”. This strategy of identity re-enactment, Tangseefa argues, is essential for Karens because it contributes to their perceptibility and intelligibility and thus, makes them “recognizable as qualified political subjects” (Tangseefa, 2006, p. 407). The geopolitics of forced migrations, ethnic politics, and geopolitical violence along the Thai-Burma border are deeply entangled in the shifting international geopolitical contexts in which they operate.

The broader geoeconomic context of Burma's deepening integration into neoliberal global capitalism is instructive for the ways in which it adds pressure on ethnic minority groups as well as the government to maintain political stability in the country. Smith (2010) notes how in 2009, economic interest in energy, trade and infrastructure projects in Burma, many of which were located in ethnic minority borderlands, meant that Burma's stability and international project were increasingly interlinked. As a result, Burma's economic restructuring has widespread geopolitical consequences that “also have an epoch-shaping impact on internal affairs” (M. Smith, 2010, p. 215). For instance, Hengsuwan illustrates how “the Burmese government in association with the Thai state and transnational dam investors has imposed the Salween dam projects on the Salween borderlands and people in the form of a terrorising state” (2013, 109). In these ways, the geopolitical present of lives in limbo is driven by the geopolitical past of the region.

In this paper I address Jolie's celebrity humanitarian role in the geopolitical present through ethnographic research among Burmese exiles in northern Thailand. I argue that the popular geopolitics of hope Jolie engendered was constituted through contradictory impulses. On one hand, Jolie signifies global capital and the concurrent widespread geoeconomic hope around Burma's deepening integration into global capitalism; on the other hand, the far-reaching geopolitics of fear have materialized around the threat of repatriation resulting from rapid political-economic change in Burma. This paper builds on recent work in popular geopolitics and geographies of emotion and affect by exploring the political role of celebrities' humanitarian interventions in creating micro-macro linkages between popular culture and everyday geopolitical experience. I engage with the geographical, material and conceptual implications of celebrity humanitarianism through an examination of how geographies of affect and emotion are mutually constituted through geopolitical, as well as geoeconomic discourse and practice (Mercille, 2008; Pollard & Sidaway, 2002; A.; Smith, 2002).

To develop this argument, this paper is organized into four sections after the explication of my research site and methodological framework below. I begin with an examination of points of intersection in recent literature on celebrity humanitarianism, popular geopolitics, geoeconomics and emotional and affective geographies. In doing so, I provide an analytical framework from which to examine how popular media and lived experience articulate with geopolitical outcomes through a “grounded but trans-local” perspective of the geopolitics of hope as it is invoked in contemporary popular humanitarianism (Katz, 2001). I then illustrate how a community of sentiment is engendered among Burmese exiles who imagine Jolie as a “ray of hope,” as well as a symbol of transnational social solidarity which is enabled, in part, through her access to global capital, as well as political power and cosmopolitan mobility. Jolie's presence in the camps and corollary widespread rumours of her visit among exiled Burmese in northern Thailand engendered heightened, if broadly defined hopes for a better future. Next, I consider the geopolitical work of celebrity gossip around Jolie's visit as it manifested among Burmese exiles along the Thai-Burma border. I draw connections between gossip, everyday geopolitics and celebrity to illustrate the multi-scalar space making strategies of popular geopolitical discourse. Finally, I examine the geoeconomics of hope and Burma's opening up to global capital as it articulates with Jolie's celebrity humanitarianism and plays out in the ongoing redefinition of the relationship between the global North and global South.

1.1. Research site and methodological framework

Research for this paper took place in tea shops, restaurants,

⁵ c.f. <https://uscampaignforburma.wordpress.com/2012/05/25/the-heavy-costs-of-business-in-burma-part-1/> Accessed 10 October 2015.

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