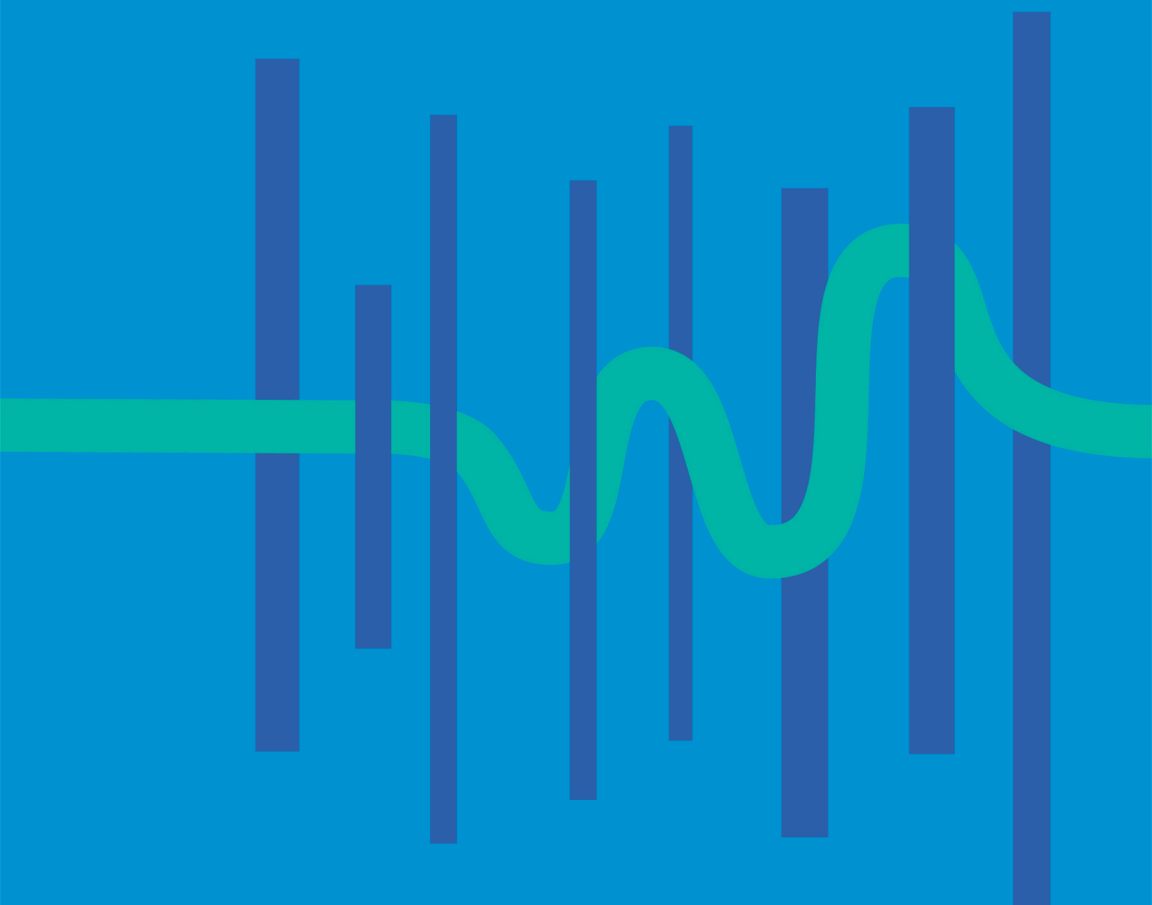


Lives in Limbo

Refugee Place-Making and
Survival in Malaysia



Gerhard Hoffstaedter

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LIVES IN LIMBO

Refugee Place-Making and
Survival in Malaysia

Gerhard Hoffstaedter

Stanford

Walter H. Shorenstein
Asia-Pacific Research Center
Freeman Spogli Institute

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For Nicole

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GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

3D JOBS Dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work that refugees often perform in Malaysia's informal economy.

ABIM Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia)

ACR Alliance for Chin Refugees, a refugee community organization providing health and other services.

ARAKANESSE/RAKHINE The Buddhist ethnic majority in Rakhine State, Myanmar, from where Rohingya also originate.

ARRC Arakan Refugee Relief Committee, representing Rakhine refugees in Malaysia.

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional intergovernmental organization comprising eleven member states in Southeast Asia.

ASYLUM ACCESS An international legal NGO providing support to refugees in status determination processes.

BAMAR The ethnic majority group in Myanmar, also known as Burmese.

BATU ARANG A town northwest of Kuala Lumpur, historically a coal mining area, now home to refugee farming communities.

BETEL LEAVES Leaves from the betel vine, chewed with areca nut, popular among people from Myanmar and grown on refugee farms.

BUMIPUTERA Literally "sons of the soil" in Malay; refers to the Indigenous peoples of Malaysia, primarily Malays and Indigenous groups from East Malaysia, who receive constitutional privileges.

CAMERON HIGHLANDS A hill station in Malaysia where approximately 3,000 Chin refugees work in farms.

CNF Chin National Front, an ethnic armed organization in Myanmar's Chin State.

COBEM Coalition of Burma Ethnic Malaysia, an umbrella organization representing ethnic refugee organizations from Myanmar.

CONIFA Confederation of Independent Football Associations, an international football organization for teams from stateless peoples, minorities, and unrecognized states.

CRC Chin Refugee Committee, one of the largest refugee community organizations in Malaysia.

EID AL-FITR Islamic festival marking the end of Ramadan.

HAKHA Capital of and the largest township in Chin State, Myanmar.

HALAL Food prepared according to Islamic law.

HINDRAF Hindu Rights Action Force, which filed a class action suit challenging Malaysia's social contract.

IMM13 A temporary immigration document that Malaysia issued to certain refugee groups, such as Acehnese refugees in the early 2000s.

JATROPHA A cash crop that Myanmar military forces farmers to grow, replacing traditional food crops.

KACHIN An ethnic minority from northern Myanmar, predominantly Christian.

KAREN An ethnic minority from eastern Myanmar, many living in refugee camps in Thailand.

KARENNI An ethnic minority from Kayah State, eastern Myanmar.

KELANTAN A state in peninsular Malaysia with a large Malay Muslim population.

KLANG VALLEY The urban conglomeration around Kuala Lumpur where most refugees in Malaysia reside.

KRC Kachin Refugee Committee, representing Kachin refugees in Malaysia.

MADRASAH Islamic religious school providing religious education alongside basic literacy and numeracy.

MCA Malaysian Chinese Association.

MIC Malaysian Indian Congress.

MKO Malaysia Karen Organization, representing Karen refugees.

MON An ethnic minority from Mon State in southern Myanmar.

MRAUK U Ancient capital of the Arakan kingdom in present-day Rakhine State.

- MRO** Mon Refugee Organization, representing Mon refugees in Malaysia.
- MUEZZIN** The person who calls Muslims to prayer from a mosque.
- MUFTI** A senior Islamic scholar qualified to issue religious rulings.
- NEP** New Economic Policy, Malaysia's affirmative action program for Bumiputera implemented after 1969.
- OIC** Organization of Islamic Cooperation, of which Malaysia is a member.
- OKD** Organization of Karenni Development, representing Karenni refugees.
- ORANG ASLI** Indigenous peoples of peninsular Malaysia.
- PAHANG** A state in peninsular Malaysia.
- PAK CIK** Respectful term for an older man in Malay, literally "uncle."
- PAS** Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, Malaysia's main Islamic political party.
- PENDATANG** Literally "newcomer" in Malay; often used pejoratively to describe non-Malay Malaysians and foreign migrants.
- POLYCRISIS** The multiplicity and cascading effects of multiple, interconnected crises that compound vulnerability.
- RAMADAN** The Islamic month of fasting, when charitable giving to refugees increases.
- RELA** Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia (People's Volunteer Corps), a volunteer civilian auxiliary force that assists with immigration enforcement.
- RFC** Rohingya Football Club, a refugee community organization using sport for identity maintenance.
- RINGGIT MALAYSIA (RM)** Malaysian currency.
- SELAYANG** An area north of Kuala Lumpur with high refugee concentrations, particularly Rohingya and Myanmar Muslims.
- SHAN** An ethnic minority from Shan State in eastern Myanmar.
- SITTWE** Capital city of Rakhine State, Myanmar.
- SRO** Shan Refugee Organization, representing Shan refugees in Malaysia.
- SUARAM** Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Malaysian People), a human rights organization.
- SWIDDEN AGRICULTURE** Slash-and-burn farming traditionally practiced in the Chin Hills.
- TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONES (TAZ)** Spaces where alternative forms of social organization can emerge outside state control, adapted here to describe refugee community activities.
- TENAGANITA** A Malaysian NGO advocating for migrant and refugee rights.

UMNO United Malays National Organization, formerly Malaysia's dominant political party.

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN agency mandated to protect and assist refugees worldwide.

UNRWA United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

USTAZ An Islamic religious teacher or scholar.

YANGON Largest city and former capital of Myanmar.

ZAKAT One of the five pillars of Islam requiring Muslims to give portions of their wealth to the poor and needy.

ZOMI An ethnic identity claimed by some Chin peoples, meaning "hill people" in their language. The term represents resistance to the colonial designation "Chin."

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This book has been a long journey in the making, beginning with a short fieldwork trip in 2009 to stay with my friend, Fr. Aloysius Mowe, a Jesuit priest and one of those encyclopedic scholars the academy no longer produces. He had studied at Al-Azhar and Oxford and was a specialist in the history of Islam, but really a master narrator on any topic. I had studied Islam in Malaysia for my PhD, and during fieldwork bumped into him to discuss interreligious dialogue in Malaysia. My interlocutors had often taken me around town, where we would interact with people they dismissed as “foreigners,” serving tea at the local mamak stalls, washing cars, and cleaning the streets, and I was intent on finding out more. When I visited Aloysius, he immediately recognized that they were most likely refugees from Myanmar, and said he could introduce me to some people, as the Jesuits had been active in supporting refugees in Malaysia. The next day, I was sitting in the offices of a health clinic run by A Call to Serve (ACTS), waiting to talk to a doctor. Next to me was a young Chin man from Myanmar, and we began to chat about this and that. Upon hearing that I was interested in learning more about refugees, he took me under his wing and introduced me to refugees and organizations over the next two weeks. Meeting Simon that day changed my trajectory as he swept me up in the messy politics of Malaysia, the country’s amazing people, the food, and the lives refugees were making there while living in legal limbo. Ours turned out to be an enduring friendship, and I am glad he is now resettled in Australia with his family. It planted in me the seeds to pursue the lives of refugees in Malaysia for the last seventeen years and write this book to help make sense of it all.

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All photographs are mine.

Lives in Limbo

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INTRODUCTION

Place-making in the Polycrisis

Rahman,¹ a 20-year-old Rohingya man, worked at a wet market in Kuala Lumpur, portering heavy boxes of produce and minding the stall for his Chinese Malaysian boss. The work was physically demanding but reliable. Each morning, Rahman would arrive before dawn to help his boss set up the stall, arranging fresh vegetables and fruits that had been trucked in from farms across Malaysia. He would spend his days lifting heavy crates, sorting produce, serving customers, and keeping the stall organized. Despite the hard labor and long hours, the job provided him with a steady income that allowed him to look after his family, send remittances back to his family in a refugee camp in Bangladesh, and maintain hope for his future. Then, rumors of a new virus swept through the market.

When the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns began in Malaysia, refugees like Rahman lost their jobs almost immediately. Unlike Malaysian citizens or legal residents who might have access to government support or unemployment benefits, Rahman and thousands of other refugees found themselves completely cut off from any safety net. Without any legal status, they received no help from the government. On the contrary, they became vilified as potential harborers of the virus, and their bodies were subjected to ever-tighter surveillance (Jalil and Hoffstaedter 2023). The media and public discourse increasingly portrayed refugees and migrant communities as dis-

¹ All names have been anonymized in order to protect refugee and participant identities.

ease vectors, responsible for spreading the contagion. What had once been a relationship of mutual dependence between refugees providing cheap labor and employers benefiting from their work suddenly transformed into suspicion and blame.

The police and military were brought in to physically close off migrant and refugee neighborhoods for fear their movements would spread the virus. Entire communities were cordoned off, with security forces preventing residents from leaving their immediate areas (Jalil and Hoffstaedter 2023). These closures were not based on actual infection rates or medical evidence, but rather on assumptions about hygiene and health practices in refugee communities. The restrictions meant that even those refugees who might have found alternative work were now physically prevented from seeking employment. Without a way to earn money, Rahman had to plead with his community and friends to help source funds to feed his family. The informal networks of mutual support that had always been crucial to refugee survival became even more vital during the pandemic. Community members shared what little they had, religious organizations provided food assistance where possible, and families stretched their savings to help neighbors. But these networks were themselves under strain, as nearly everyone in the community faced the same predicament.

This was not the future he had imagined for himself and his family when he boarded a rickety boat for a treacherous journey across the Andaman Sea three years ago. Like many Rohingya before him, Rahman had risked everything on the dangerous sea crossing from Myanmar to Malaysia, driven by persecution and the promise of a better life. The journey itself was harrowing, with overcrowded boats, the threat of capsizing, and the constant risk of being intercepted by traffickers or hostile authorities. But Rahman had endured it all with the hope that Malaysia, as a Muslim-majority country, would offer sanctuary and opportunity. He had heard stories from other Rohingya about finding work and earning decent wages; eventually, perhaps even being resettled to a safe third country was a possibility, one where his children could have a proper education and legal status. The wet market job, despite its difficulties, had represented progress toward that dream. Now, confined to his neighborhood and unable to work, watching his community being blamed for a global pandemic, Rahman found himself questioning whether the dangerous journey had been worth it. The COVID-19 crisis stripped away the thin veneer of tolerance that had allowed refugees to exist on the margins of Malaysian society, revealing the fundamental precariousness of their position as people without legal status or rights in a country that had never officially recognized their presence.

Rahman's story during the COVID-19 pandemic crystallizes the central questions that drive this book: How do refugees experience life in protracted situations without legal status in countries like Malaysia? What forms of agency do refugees exercise within systems designed to exclude them? How do refugees create meaningful lives and communities despite systematic marginalization? And what can refugee experiences teach us about the nature of belonging, citizenship, and human rights in contemporary Southeast Asia? These questions emerge from a fundamental tension in Malaysia's approach to refugee protection: the simultaneous dependence on refugee labor, especially in the vast informal economy, and rejection of refugee rights. This contradiction creates a "protection paradox," where refugees are economically integrated but socially excluded, practically tolerated but legally prohibited, individually welcomed but collectively rejected.

This book argues that understanding this paradox requires moving beyond traditional approaches that focus either on state policies or refugee experiences in isolation. Instead, it develops a relational analysis that examines how refugee agency and state strategies interact to create complex patterns of exclusion and belonging. This analysis reveals how refugees are not simply victims of circumstances beyond their control but active participants in systems that simultaneously constrain and enable their survival (Nyers 2006). The theoretical framework I develop throughout this study draws on recent scholarship on place-making and urban migration (explored comprehensively in chapter 5), the politics of hospitality and conditional welcome (examined in detail in chapter 2), and the creation of community through cultural practices (analyzed through sporting activities and cultural celebrations in chapter 7). The polycrisis framework proves essential for understanding these dynamics, as I demonstrate particularly in chapter 4's analysis of how refugees navigate multiple intersecting forms of exclusion and marginalization.

Rahman's experience during COVID-19 illustrates how health, economic, legal, and social crises intersect to create effects that are greater than the sum of their parts. The pandemic did not simply add another problem to refugees' existing difficulties; it revealed the fundamental interconnectedness of multiple systems of exclusion and the ways these systems can rapidly intensify refugee vulnerability. Yet the book also reveals how refugees develop strategies for surviving and thriving within these constraints, and how they create forms of belonging that operate alongside, rather than against, their systematic exclusion. These strategies include the development of parallel community institutions, strategic deployment of religious and ethnic identities,

creation of informal economic networks, and cultivation of transnational connections that provide both material support and emotional sustenance.

The book's focus on Chin and Rohingya refugees, whose historical trajectories and contemporary experiences I trace in chapter 1, demonstrates how different forms of displacement create different possibilities for agency and belonging. The comparative analysis shows how factors such as religion, education, international advocacy networks, and host-country policies interact in complex ways to shape refugee experiences. It challenges simplistic narratives about refugee integration while revealing the sophisticated ways that refugees navigate systems of exclusion. The ethnographic foundation of this study, based on over twelve months of intensive fieldwork and more than 80 formal interviews, enables a deep analysis of how these processes unfold in practice. The methodological approach, which I detail below, emphasizes long-term engagement and community-based research that positions refugees as active collaborators rather than passive subjects of study.

Ultimately, this book argues that refugee experiences in Malaysia reveal broader truths about the nature of belonging and exclusion in contemporary Southeast Asia. By examining how refugees create meaningful lives despite systematic marginalization, the book contributes to debates about citizenship, human rights, and the possibilities for more inclusive forms of political community. Rahman's story, and the thousands of others like it, challenge us to reimagine what protection, belonging, and human security might mean in our interconnected but deeply unequal world.

REFRAMING THE "CRISIS" NARRATIVE

Whenever we speak about refugees, a crisis narrative continues to dominate the discourse. When states and media outlets speak of a "refugee crisis," they typically invoke images of overwhelming numbers, disorder, and threats to security. However, these narratives obscure a fundamental reality: refugees constitute only a small fraction of the world's population. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its *Global Trends* report, there were approximately 26 million refugees under the UNHCR's mandate in 2019 out of a global population of 7.7 billion people, representing roughly 0.34 percent of the world's population (UNHCR 2023; UN DESA 2019a). Among the 272 million international migrants worldwide, refugees represent only about 9.5 percent of total international migration (UN DESA 2019b). As migration scholar Hein de Haas has argued, these numbers tell a particular kind of narrative: a crisis story that helps the aid sector secure

funding and justifies increasingly restrictive border policies, despite the relatively small scale of refugee movements globally (de Haas 2008, 2023).

Thus, the crisis framing serves specific political purposes. Regional states and the international community often frame large population movements as emergencies to conjure notions of disorder and justify the securitization of mobility, to create stronger border protection mechanisms, and even to close borders. This leads to policies focused on containment and deterrence rather than protection. The unidimensional crisis that many states describe, usually through the arrival of large numbers of refugees, deliberately hides the structural and underlying causes of displacement: systematic persecution, economic inequality, environmental degradation, and the legacies of colonialism. Such crisis narratives place the burden of responsibility on refugees themselves, portraying them as a problem to be solved rather than as people exercising agency in often impossible circumstances (Nyers 2006). Rahman's story illustrates how this framing operates: when COVID-19 emerged, refugees were quickly scapegoated as disease vectors rather than recognized as front-line workers who had been integral to Malaysia's economy. The "crisis" was deemed not to be the virus itself, but rather the presence of refugees who might spread it.

To move beyond these limiting narratives, this book employs the concept of *polycrisis*, which denotes the multiplicity and cascading effects of multiple, interconnected crises. First used by French philosopher Edgar Morin and developed by historian Adam Tooze, polycrisis speaks to what Morin and Kern (1999, 74) describe as the "complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, [and] crises" that characterize contemporary global challenges. The polycrisis framework is particularly fitting for understanding refugee displacement in Southeast Asia, where crises are compounded by preexisting structural vulnerabilities. Rahman's experience during COVID-19 exemplifies this: the health crisis intersected with preexisting economic precarity, legal exclusion, and social marginalization to create a situation far more devastating than any single crisis alone. The pandemic did not simply add another problem to refugees' lives; it revealed and intensified the fundamental structural violence of their legal limbo.

In Malaysia's context, the polycrisis includes: the ongoing persecution and displacement from Myanmar; the absence of legal frameworks for refugee protection; the economic dependence on cheap migrant labor; the racialized politics of Malaysian multiculturalism; and the global systems that make Malaysia a transit country rather than a destination for permanent settlement. Each crisis feeds into and amplifies the others, creating what refugees experience as a state of permanent limbo or emergency. This intercon-

nected nature of multiple crises becomes particularly evident in my analysis of how refugees navigate healthcare systems that serve as sites of surveillance rather than care (chapter 5), how they develop agricultural livelihoods that provide both economic security and deeper forms of place-making (chapter 6), and how they encounter conditional forms of hospitality that reflect broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion in Malaysian society (chapter 2).

Importantly, the polycrisis framework shows how transit countries like Malaysia actively deepen these crises through policies that maintain refugees in legal limbo while simultaneously exploiting their labor. This is not accidental but represents a system where refugees' vulnerability becomes economically and politically useful and therefore exploitable by the host state. The polycrisis thus operates not as a series of unfortunate coincidences but as a structured system of marginalization that serves specific interests while maintaining plausible deniability about responsibility. I expand on the concept and its role in Malaysia in chapter 4.

CHIN AND ROHINGYA PEOPLES: CONTESTED IDENTITIES AND COLONIAL LEGACIES

In my many years of accompanying refugees in Malaysia, I quickly realized that the two largest refugee cohorts were the Chin and the Rohingya. The first refugee I encountered in the field was at a medical center where I had gone to interview service providers; he turned out to be Chin and, as it happened, an activist; he took me under his wing to better understand the internal ethnic politics of Myanmar and ultimately the internal ethnic politics of Chin themselves. Both Chin and Rohingya have been fleeing Myanmar for many years, decades even, and both have complicated histories, internally and as opposed to the Bamar majority in Myanmar. Indeed, both ethnic labels remain highly contested, with their contemporary meanings rooted in the complex legacies of British colonialism in Myanmar. These identities were not simply inherited from precolonial societies but were actively constructed through colonial administrative practices, missionary activities, and anti-colonial resistance movements. Understanding these historical formations is crucial for comprehending how these groups experience displacement and seek protection in Malaysia today, as I explore through detailed case studies of contemporary registration processes and the development of community organizations and support networks (examined across multiple chapters).

Chin people represent a linguistically and ethnically diverse collection of hill tribes from the mountainous northwest of Myanmar, traditionally inhabiting the Chin Hills that straddle the borders of Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh (Lehman 1963). What unites these diverse groups today is primarily their shared Christian faith, the result of intensive missionary activity by American Baptist and other Protestant missions beginning in the late nineteenth century (Sakhong 2003). The conversion of formerly animist tribes to Christianity was transformative, creating what scholar Lian Sakhong (2003) describes as a modern, unified Chin identity that transcended traditional tribal boundaries. Christianity provided not only religious beliefs but also educational opportunities, as missions established schools that taught literacy in both Chin languages and English. This educational foundation has had lasting effects, with many Chin refugees arriving in Malaysia possessing higher levels of formal education compared to other refugee groups (Hoffstaedter 2014b), a factor that significantly influences their experiences of place-making and community organization.

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the Chin people have faced systematic persecution under successive military governments. This persecution has taken distinctly religious forms: the removal of Christian crosses from public spaces, the harassment and imprisonment of pastors, and the enforcement of Buddhist nationalist policies that marginalize religious minorities (Chin Human Rights Organization 2012b). The military government's "Burmanization" campaign has sought to impose Burmese Buddhist culture on ethnic minorities, viewing Christianity as a foreign influence that threatens national unity (Mang 2011). A 2011 report determined that 92 percent of households in Chin State had been subjected to forced labor, including portering, road building, and growing cash crops for the Myanmar military (Physicians for Human Rights 2011). Many Chin refugees describe fleeing after witnessing the destruction of churches, the persecution of religious leaders, or being forced to participate in Buddhist ceremonies. The religious character of their persecution has important implications for how they seek protection: Chin refugees often emphasize their Christian identity when applying for asylum, and their churches serve as crucial community organizing centers in Malaysia (Hoffstaedter 2014b; Hoffstaedter and Lamb 2019).

The Rohingya people present a more complex and tragic case of displacement. A predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic minority from Rakhine State in Myanmar, the Rohingya population numbers approximately two million people, with fewer than one million remaining in Myanmar and the majority now living in diaspora communities across Bangladesh, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Hoffstaedter 2020). Both Rakhine and Myanmar

are Buddhist-majority states, and ethnic and religious tensions have been an ongoing concern, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya over the last century and what have been described as crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and a genocide. Rohingya trace their historical roots in the region to the Arakan kingdom, centered in Mrauk U, which ruled the region from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. Mrauk U was a Buddhist kingdom heavily influenced by neighboring Islamic sultanates in the Indian subcontinent, especially the neighboring sultanate of Bengal, of which it was, for a while, a vassal state. Before that, Muslim traders from the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent frequented the region since the eighth or eleventh century; some were said to have been shipwrecked here, others established strong trading outposts, and many settled in the region's ports, bringing with them the religion of Islam.

The colonial period fundamentally transformed regional dynamics. In the late eighteenth century (1784), the Burmese conquered Arakan, and many Muslims fled across the border into Muslim Bengal, seeking protection under the British Raj. The Burmese also took many prisoners from the region, whom they relocated to central Burma, leaving Arakan sparsely populated. Almost a century later, in 1885, the British (over the course of three Anglo-Burmese wars) had annexed the entire country of Burma and incorporated it into British India. They then encouraged labor migrants to move to Arakan for seasonal agricultural work, resulting in an increase in the population from neighboring Bengal territory. This colonial labor migration policy would later be used to justify claims that Rohingya were merely recent immigrants rather than indigenous inhabitants. During World War II, tensions escalated into communal violence, especially between pro-Japanese Arakanese and Muslim Arakanese fighting for the British. This bifurcated Arakan along ethno-religious lines. In the war's aftermath, Muslims who had fought for the British Empire argued for a Muslim state or the annexation into East Pakistan (Bangladesh today). Neither was granted, and Muslims who now dominated the northern region of Arakan were incorporated into the newly independent Burma. It was during the post-independence period that Muslims in the region began to use the term "Rohingya" as a self-describing ethnonym in their political endeavors. This was a political necessity as the Muslim population of Burma was and is very diverse, and the struggles for self-determination in Arakan were not shared across the Muslim community. Thus, Rohingya became the ethnic identity ascribed to the Muslims of Arakan to differentiate their quest for national belonging and inclusion.

However, the Rohingya's claims to belonging in Myanmar have been systematically contested by the Myanmar state. The 1982 Burma Citizenship

Law explicitly excluded Rohingya from the list of recognized ethnic groups, rendering them stateless by declaring them as “non-national” or “foreign residents” (Refugees International 2009, 36; Human Rights Watch 2000). The military regime used arbitrary and discriminatory means that spanned the legal, political, and economic domains to limit Rohingya participation in politics, education, economic, social, and civic life. This led to many Rohingya becoming effectively stateless in their own country. Ongoing political tensions escalated over the twentieth century with several mass expulsions of Rohingya across the border to Bangladesh. This legal exclusion has escalated into what international observers, including UN investigators, have termed genocide, with scholars similarly characterizing the Rohingya’s systematic persecution as genocide (Green et al. 2015). In late 2012, large-scale mob violence encouraged by the Bamar-dominated Buddhist government saw scores of Rohingya killed or displaced; many survivors were forced into internment camps (Physicians for Human Rights 2013). The Myanmar military’s systematic campaigns of violence against Rohingya civilians, including mass killings, rape, and the burning of entire villages, represent what scholars have called a “slow-burning genocide” that has intensified dramatically since 2012 (Zarni and Cowley 2014). As a result of this persecution, hundreds of thousands have fled their homes to neighboring Bangladesh, and onward to predominantly Malaysia, where a sizable diaspora has been established. The experience of systematic persecution and statelessness profoundly shapes how Rohingya refugees experience life in Malaysia (O’Brien and Hoffstaedter 2020), influencing everything from their encounters with Malaysian authorities (chapters 3 and 5) to their strategies for maintaining cultural identity (chapter 7).

The different historical trajectories of Chin and Rohingya displacement have resulted in starkly different treatment by both the UNHCR and the Malaysian government. These differences expose how religion, geopolitics, and international advocacy networks shape refugee protection in practice. Chin refugees have benefited from advocacy from Christian organizations in resettlement countries, particularly the United States, where evangelical groups have lobbied for their protection. Since the early 2000s, the UNHCR has resettled Chin refugees in large numbers to the United States and Australia, creating substantial transnational diaspora communities that provide both financial and political support for those remaining in Malaysia. However, this resettlement pathway has also meant that Chin refugees have never been encouraged to integrate into Malaysian society. The assumption has always been that Malaysia represents a temporary transit point before resettlement elsewhere. In 2015, as the security situation in Myanmar

appeared to improve, the UNHCR even encouraged Chin refugees to return to Myanmar voluntarily, a policy that proved premature given the subsequent military coup in 2021. It was subsequently quietly reversed by the UNHCR.

Rohingya refugees, by contrast, have experienced a more complex relationship with Malaysian protection. Malaysia's identity as a Muslim-majority country has created expectations among Rohingya that they would receive sanctuary based on religious solidarity. Some early-arriving Rohingya refugees in the 1970s and 1980s did achieve a degree of integration into Malaysian society, with some obtaining permanent residency and even citizenship. However, more recent Rohingya arrivals have faced increasing restrictions and hostility. The Malaysian government has been reluctant to provide formal protection to Rohingya refugees, partly due to concerns about encouraging further arrivals and partly due to diplomatic considerations with Myanmar. The UNHCR has not pursued large-scale resettlement for Rohingya refugees, instead focusing on local integration possibilities that have largely failed to materialize. Both refugee populations in Malaysia exhibit distinct demographic patterns that reflect the gendered nature of displacement and labor migration. Approximately two-thirds of both Chin and Rohingya refugees are men, with one-third women. This gender imbalance reflects the fact that men are often the first to migrate, seeking work opportunities that will allow them to support families who remain in Myanmar or have fled to other countries. Both refugee populations also display significant diversity in terms of educational background, class position, and family circumstances, all factors that profoundly affect their mobility options and survival strategies in Malaysia.

MALAYSIA AS CRUCIAL PROTECTION SPACE

Malaysia occupies a unique and contradictory position in Southeast Asia's refugee landscape. The region hosts almost three million people of concern according to UNHCR figures, yet refugee policy across Southeast Asia has been driven primarily by states' efforts to counter human trafficking and increase border protection rather than enhance protection for displaced populations. This represents a "protection deficit," i.e., a systematic failure to develop adequate legal and institutional frameworks for refugee rights. The legal vacuum is striking: among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) eleven member states, only three (Timor-Leste, the Philippines, and Cambodia) are signatories to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Malaysia, despite hosting one of the region's largest refugee pop-

ulations, has consistently refused to sign these legal protection instruments. Its non-signatory status reflects a deliberate policy choice that allows the Malaysian state to maintain flexibility in how it treats refugees while avoiding international legal obligations (Hoffstaedter and Jalil 2025).

Malaysia's emergence as a crucial protection space is paradoxical. The country has gained a reputation as a refugee transit hub, particularly for Christian ethnic minorities from Myanmar who could expect resettlement to the United States or Australia within a few years. This informal resettlement pathway made Malaysia attractive to refugees compared to neighboring Thailand, where Myanmar refugees are largely confined to camps, or India, where registration is slower and resettlement opportunities are minimal. Yet this protection is entirely contingent and revocable. Malaysia's Immigration Act makes refugees' presence illegal, placing them in the same legal category as undocumented economic migrants. According to current UNHCR figures, there are approximately 200,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers in West Malaysia as of 2025, with the vast majority — nearly 180,000 — originating from Myanmar (UNHCR Malaysia 2025). The Myanmar refugee population comprises 117,670 Rohingya, 29,620 Chin, and 31,730 individuals from other ethnic groups fleeing conflict-affected areas or persecution. Beyond Myanmar nationals, Malaysia hosts approximately 21,230 refugees and asylum seekers from 50 other countries, including significant populations from Pakistan (5,650), Yemen (3,050), Somalia (2,780), Afghanistan (2,770), Syria (2,520), Sri Lanka (1,030), Palestine (500), Iraq (440), and other nations affected by war and persecution. The demographic composition shows that 64 percent of refugees and asylum seekers are men, while 36 percent are women, with children under 18 comprising 59,250 individuals, which is nearly 30 percent of the total population (UNHCR Malaysia 2025).

Refugees in Malaysia thus inhabit a legal limbo that creates a “precarious protection,” i.e., a form of sanctuary that exists despite, rather than because of, state policy. Refugees like Rahman can access work in the informal economy and avoid the physical confinement of refugee camps, but they remain vulnerable to arbitrary detention, deportation, and exploitation. Their “protection” depends entirely on the discretion of individual employers, landlords, and officials rather than on any systematic guarantee of rights. Malaysia's approach to refugee protection operates through what can be described as “strategic ambiguity,” or the deliberate policy of neither fully recognizing nor completely rejecting the presence of refugees. This ambiguity serves multiple functions: it allows Malaysia to benefit from cheap refugee labor while avoiding the costs of formal integration; it provides flexibility to respond to changing regional dynamics; and it deflects international pres-

sure by pointing to the presence of the UNHCR while maintaining that refugee protection is not Malaysia’s responsibility (Jalil and Hoffstaedter 2024).

FIGURE 1 Market and apartment buildings with high refugee concentration close to the city center of Kuala Lumpur



The Malaysian government has, at different times, provided temporary protection arrangements for specific groups. Acehese refugees received IMM13 visas, which allowed them to work and live legally post-tsunami, during the early 2000s, and there have been periodic discussions about providing work permits for Rohingya refugees (Hoffstaedter 2015). However, these arrangements are always temporary, revocable, and dependent on broader political considerations rather than principled commitments to refugee rights. This informal system of accommodation means that refugees’ experiences vary dramatically depending on their ethnicity, religion, time of arrival, and individual circumstances. Some early-arriving Rohingya refugees achieved a degree of integration into Malaysian society, while more recent arrivals face greater restrictions and hostility.

The contradiction at the heart of Malaysia’s refugee policy is that economic integration proceeds alongside systematic social and political exclusion. Refugees are essential to Malaysia’s economy, working in what are called “3D” jobs: dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work that Malaysian citizens increasingly reject. Refugees staff restaurant kitchens, work on palm oil

plantations, labor on construction sites, and, like Rahman, perform essential services in wet markets and other informal sectors. This economic dependence creates a peculiar form of conditional hospitality. Refugees are tolerated, even welcomed, as workers, but they remain unwelcome as people with rights, needs, and aspirations beyond their labor power. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed this contradiction: refugees who had been economically essential suddenly became medically threatening, illustrating how quickly conditional acceptance can transform into active hostility. Malaysia's position as a crucial protection space in Southeast Asia thus represents not a model of humanitarian leadership but rather a case study in how states can benefit from refugee presence while avoiding responsibility for refugee protection. This systemic precarity has significant implications for how we understand both refugee agency and state sovereignty in the contemporary global order, themes I explore throughout the book, particularly in chapter 4's analysis of place-making under polycrisis conditions.

METHODOLOGY

This study² employed a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork approach to understand the complex and varied experiences of refugees living in Malaysia. The research was predominately conducted over a 12-month period from 2015 to 2017, building upon ten years of prior ethnographic research experience in Malaysia and extensive networks within refugee communities established through pilot studies conducted between 2009 and 2012. The extended time-frame was essential for developing the deep, trust-based relationships fundamental to ethical ethnographic research with vulnerable populations, relationships that prove crucial for understanding the place-making strategies.

Drawing on anthropological traditions that employ reflexive methods (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992), this research positioned the researcher not as an advocate for so-called voiceless people, but as a cultural intermediary working to build bridges for better understanding and create interstitial spaces for intercultural engagement that allow different lifeworlds to

2 The research that underpins this project was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) DE140100052. This methodology section draws on ethical clearance obtained from the University of Queensland Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee (BSSERC) (clearance no. 2015000349) and follows the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research guidelines for research with vulnerable populations.

become mutually intelligible through cultural translation (Hoffstaedter 2013; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006). This approach aligns with contemporary scholarship that emphasizes refugee agency and the politics of representation in forced migration research (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992; Malkki 1995b; Sigona 2014). This approach also challenges traditional humanitarian narratives that often construct refugees as passive victims, instead recognizing their active role in meaning-making and survival strategies (Harrell-Bond 1986). This process relied fundamentally on immersion with a range of refugees, organizations, and groups, and the kindness and support of the people with whom I worked.

Fieldwork was primarily conducted in the Klang Valley urban conglomeration, stretching from Kuala Lumpur to the port of Klang, where most refugees in West Malaysia reside, to access established refugee communities, employment opportunities in the large informal sector, and UNHCR registration services. Additional fieldwork was conducted in regional centers, including Penang, the Cameron Highlands, Batu Arang, and remote plantation areas, to capture the diversity of refugee settlement patterns across peninsular Malaysia. Extensive participant observation formed the cornerstone of the research methodology, involving sustained engagement with refugee communities over the full year of fieldwork. This approach follows established anthropological methods for conducting research with marginalized populations, emphasizing the importance of long-term relationship building and trust development (Jackson 2002; Turner 2016). The methodology draws on scholarship highlighting the significance of ethnographic immersion for understanding the everyday experiences of urban refugees and the ways they navigate exclusion and create belonging (Grabska 2006; Jansen 2008). This included living with refugees, participating in their daily activities, attending community events, religious gatherings, and informal social interactions. The prolonged nature of this engagement was crucial for understanding the nuanced ways refugees navigate their daily lives, create social networks, and develop strategies for survival and belonging in Malaysia's challenging legal environment.

The research involved conducting over 80 formal interviews with refugees over the 12-month period, complemented by countless informal conversations that emerged through participant observation. Interview participants were drawn primarily from Rohingya and Chin communities, representing the largest refugee populations in Malaysia, as well as smaller numbers from other Myanmar ethnic groups, including Myanmar Muslims, Karen, Karenni, and Kachin refugees. Interviews employed both structured and unstructured formats, depending on the context and participant preferences.

Many interviews were conducted as life history narratives, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words and according to their own priorities. This approach proved particularly important given the traumatic nature of many participants' experiences and the need to center their agency in the research process.

FIGURE 2 Building rapport through shared activities, such as a fishing trip with Chin refugee community members



Recognition of cultural sensitivities around gender interactions was central to the interview methodology. My wife, who is a trained oral historian, played an instrumental role in facilitating interviews with Rohingya and Chin women, enabling access to perspectives and experiences that would otherwise have been difficult to capture (e.g., see Lamb and Hoffstaedter 2020). This collaborative approach was essential for understanding the gendered dimensions of refugee experiences, including challenges and survival strategies specific to women. The presence of my partner also enabled more nuanced data collection about family dynamics, child-rearing practices, and women's community networks. Many female participants expressed greater comfort discussing sensitive topics related to displacement trauma, family separation, and experiences of discrimination when speaking with another woman, especially in the Rohingya community.

Additionally, I recruited a team of research assistants from host and relevant refugee communities, including individuals with Myanmar Muslim, Rohingya, Chin, Burmese, and Malay backgrounds. This community-based approach was essential for several reasons: it provided cultural brokerage and translation services, facilitated access to community networks, and helped address the inherent power imbalances between researcher and participants (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014). The approach aligns with scholarship that emphasizes the importance of community participation in refugee research and the value of insider knowledge for understanding marginalized experiences (Kaiser 2005; Jacobsen 2005). Comprehensive training was provided to research assistants in ethical research conduct, interview techniques, and documenting oral testimonies. This training covered informed consent procedures, confidentiality protocols, trauma-informed interviewing approaches, and methods for supporting participants who became distressed during interviews. The training also emphasized the importance of community ownership of the research process and ways to ensure that participation benefited community members. Research assistants often worked independently within their communities, conducting interviews and facilitating connections with potential participants. This approach was particularly important given the precarious legal status of refugees and the need to avoid exposing participants to additional risks through research participation.

FIGURE 3 Interviewing Rohingya grass-cutters in their container home/workplace



Beyond refugee community members, the research included interviews with key stakeholders representing different aspects of Malaysia's refugee landscape. This encompassed Malaysian civil society representatives, including staff from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community organizations, and advocacy groups working with refugees; community leaders and representatives, both formal and informal leaders within refugee communities who play key roles in community organizing and advocacy; international organization staff, including UNHCR representatives and staff from international NGOs providing services to refugees; Malaysian society members, including employers who hire refugees, landlords, neighbors, and others who interact with refugees in daily life; and expatriate supporters, long-term expatriate residents involved in refugee support activities and community work. These stakeholder interviews provided crucial context for understanding the broader social, political, and economic environment within which refugees navigate their lives in Malaysia, insights that prove particularly important for understanding the conditional nature of hospital-

ity examined in chapter 2 and the strategic visibility employed in sporting activities analyzed in chapter 7.

Given the vulnerable legal status of refugees in Malaysia, extensive ethical safeguards were implemented throughout the research process. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect participant privacy and security. Data was stored on password-protected devices and in locked cabinets, with particular attention to ensure that participant information could not be accessed by authorities. This approach reflects scholarship on the ethical complexities of conducting research with undocumented populations and the need for enhanced confidentiality measures (Good 2007; Kibreab 2004). The research approach prioritized beneficence, following the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research principle that research should provide meaningful benefit to participants and communities. As an engaged anthropologist, my research always aims to bear witness to refugee experiences and document stories that might otherwise remain unheard, while being mindful of the potential consequences of academic work for the communities being studied. Research assistants were provided with information about local support services and community resources to connect participants with assistance if needed. The embedded nature of research assistants within their own communities meant they could provide ongoing support and follow-up contact with participants beyond the formal research interaction.

Data collection involved multiple methods, including audio recording of interviews (with consent), detailed field notes from participant observation, photography of community events and activities, and collection of relevant documents such as community newsletters and policy materials. The multi-method approach provided both breadth and depth, enabling analysis of individual experiences alongside broader patterns of exclusion and belonging, an analysis that forms the foundation for the comparative examination of Chin and Rohingya experiences throughout the book. Field notes were maintained daily and included both observational data and reflexive commentary on the research process, researcher positionality, and emerging analytical insights. Regular debriefing sessions were held with research assistants to ensure ethical standards were maintained and to incorporate their insights into the ongoing research process. The ethnographic data were analyzed through a reflexive, iterative process that sought to center refugee voices while providing rigorous scholarly analysis. This involved ongoing reflection on questions of representation, reciprocity, and the potential consequences of academic work for research participants and their communities. Analysis focused on understanding both individual experiences and broader

structural patterns, examining how refugees create meaning, build social connections, and develop strategies for navigating Malaysia's complex social and legal environment. The longitudinal nature of the fieldwork enabled analysis of how experiences and strategies changed over time in response to shifting circumstances and policy changes.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This book makes several interconnected theoretical contributions that build upon and extend existing scholarship in refugee studies, urban anthropology, and Southeast Asian studies. The concept of “radical othering” (Hoffstaedter 2011b) provides a framework for understanding how refugees are positioned within host societies that goes beyond traditional concepts of difference developed in postcolonial theory. While scholars like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha focused primarily on colonial relationships and cultural difference, the refugee experience in Malaysia reveals forms of exclusion that operate through different mechanisms and serve different functions. Radical othering, as I conceptualize it throughout this book but particularly in the analysis of daily urban encounters and the examination of conditional hospitality, refers to the systematic process by which refugees are positioned as fundamentally outside the normal categories of social and political belonging. Unlike other forms of othering that still acknowledge the “other” as part of a shared social universe, radical othering places refugees in what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls a “state of exception,” i.e., a space where normal rules and categories cease to apply.

In Malaysia's context, this process is particularly complex because it operates within an already intricate system of ethnic categorization. Malaysia's official multiculturalism recognizes three main ethnic groups: Malay or *bumiputera* (sons of the soil), Chinese, and Indian. Refugees, however, exist outside the state-maintained categories; neither incorporated into an existing ethnic category nor acknowledged as a separate category deserving recognition. This positioning serves multiple functions: it creates a scapegoat for societal tensions (Girard 1986), deflects attention from Malaysia's deep-seated racial and political divisions, and reinforces Malaysian national identity through contrast with the excluded “them” (Hoffstaedter 2017b). Malaysia's multicultural yet ethnically divided society tolerates refugees through informal mechanisms like UNHCR operations while simultaneously denying them formal legal recognition, creating what I describe as a liminal, extra-legal “non-place” that reinforces their marginalization (Van Houtum

and Van Naerssen 2002). As the “radical other,” refugees stand outside Malaysia’s ethnicized political discourse and daily confrontations, making them vulnerable to discrimination without repercussions to the wider body politic. The concept is particularly evident in the treatment of minorities within minority groups like Chin refugees, who represent multiple layers of otherness: Christian in a Muslim-majority state, racially resembling Chinese, another Malaysian minority, and residing as undocumented immigrants.

This radical otherness has paradoxical effects. On the one hand, it renders refugees invisible to official policy and excludes them from normal political processes, leaving them trapped in the “politics of (in)visibility” (Hoffstaedter 2011b). On the other hand, as Jean Baudrillard (1993, 137–38) suggests, radical otherness can possess a “lingering presence” that destabilizes systems of domination. Refugees’ very existence outside Malaysia’s ethnic framework reveals the contingent and constructed nature of these categories, potentially opening spaces for alternative forms of political belonging. In previous work (Hoffstaedter 2014a, Hoffstaedter 2016), I demonstrate how this systematic exclusion serves broader political purposes while keeping refugees in a state of perpetual precariousness, unable to fully integrate into Malaysian society despite their physical presence within its borders.

Another important concept is that of place-making, as developed in human geography and urban studies. It typically refers to community-driven efforts to create meaningful, functional spaces that reflect local needs and identities. However, the refugee experience in Malaysia requires us to extend this concept to situations where place-making occurs within fundamentally hostile environments characterized by legal exclusion, economic exploitation, and social marginalization. Refugee place-making in Malaysia operates through “sociabilities of emplacement” (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018), i.e., the informal networks, practices, and spaces through which refugees create forms of belonging despite their systematic exclusion. These sociabilities include: transforming apartment buildings into informal community centers; creating parallel educational systems for refugee children; developing rotating credit associations that provide financial security; and establishing religious and cultural spaces that maintain connections to the homeland while adapting to Malaysian contexts. Crucially, these place-making activities are not simply adaptive responses to exclusion but represent forms of agency that can unsettle dominant ideas about Malaysian national identity. When refugees create communities, establish successful businesses, or develop innovative survival strategies, they challenge narratives about Malaysian society that depend on their exclusion and marginalization. However, refugee place-making also operates within severe constraints.

The constant threat of immigration raids, detention, and deportation means that refugees must develop forms of belonging that remain invisible to state authorities. Their place-making strategies thus involve a delicate balance between creating meaningful community life and maintaining the low profile necessary for survival.

One theoretical challenge in refugee studies is how to acknowledge refugee agency without minimizing the structural constraints that shape their lives. The experiences of Chin and Rohingya refugees in Malaysia reveal forms of agency that operate within, rather than against, systems of exclusion and exploitation. This constrained agency manifests in several ways: the strategic use of religious and ethnic identities to access protection networks; the development of informal labor arrangements that provide economic security while remaining technically illegal; the creation of transnational connections that allow refugees to maintain homeland ties while building new lives in Malaysia; and the tactical deployment of “refugeeness” as a form of social capital that can sometimes elicit sympathy or assistance. These forms of agency are not heroic resistance against oppression but rather practical strategies people develop to survive and thrive in impossible circumstances. Thus, they represent what James Scott (1985) calls “weapons of the weak,” forms of everyday resistance that work within systems of power rather than directly challenging them.

This book makes several specific contributions to understanding migration and displacement in Southeast Asia. First, it centers the experiences of transit countries rather than focusing primarily on the source or destination countries of refugees. This shift in perspective reveals how transit countries like Malaysia are not merely passive way stations but active participants in shaping refugee experiences through their policies of strategic ambiguity. Second, the book contributes to debates about ASEAN’s approach to human rights and refugee protection. Rather than simply critiquing ASEAN’s limitations, I argue that the organization’s principle of non-interference actually enables a form of regional governance that benefits from refugee labor while avoiding responsibility for refugee protection. This represents a particular form of “organized irresponsibility” that requires new analytical frameworks. Third, the book extends critical multiculturalism debates to the refugee context. Malaysia’s official multiculturalism has been extensively analyzed by scholars, but the position of refugees outside this multicultural (or multi-racial) system reveals important dynamics about how multicultural frameworks can simultaneously include and exclude different populations.

Furthermore, the book’s focus on two specific ethnic groups allows for comparative analysis that contrasts both similarities and differences in refu-

gee experiences. This comparative approach allows us to see how factors such as religion, education, international advocacy networks, and host-country policies interact to shape protection outcomes in complex ways. The following chapter provides a detailed account of the history of both Rohingya and Chin, as well as their migration patterns to Malaysia.

CHAPTER 1

Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Patterns of Chin and Rohingya Migration to Malaysia

Malaysia has emerged as a crucial protection space for refugees in Southeast Asia, hosting approximately 200,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar (UNHCR 2025), though the actual figure is likely double that. Among these displaced populations, two groups predominate: the Rohingya, a Muslim minority from Rakhine State, and the Chin, a largely Christian ethnic minority from Myanmar's mountainous northwest. Together, these communities represent the largest contingent of refugees in Malaysia, yet their paths to displacement, migration routes, and settlement experiences differ markedly due to distinct historical trajectories, religious identities, and relationships with both the Myanmar state and Malaysian society. Understanding how these groups came to Malaysia in large numbers requires examining not only contemporary persecution in Myanmar but also the deeper historical forces that shaped ethnic boundaries, the different migration networks they utilized, and the complex organizational structures they developed. This chapter shows how historical administrative practices continue to influence displacement patterns, how religious identity shapes reception in Malaysia, and how refugee communities have developed sophisticated systems to navigate their precarious legal status.

ROHINGYA: FROM ARAKAN KINGDOM TO SYSTEMATIC PERSECUTION

The Rohingya can trace their presence in the historical Arakan region of modern-day Myanmar to significant historical depth, with connections to the medieval Arakan kingdom of Mrauk U, which flourished between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. This kingdom maintained strong connections with Islamic sultanates in the Indian subcontinent, particularly Bengal, and engaged in centuries of cultural and religious exchange. Muslim merchants, scholars, and settlers had established communities along the coast since at least the eighth century, creating a foundational Islamic presence that predated later colonial interventions. During the Arakan kingdom period, the porous borders between Bengal and Arakan allowed for continued movement and settlement of Muslim populations in this strategically important coastal region. However, British colonial administrative practices created lasting divisions through tools such as the census, which helped codify identities that were once more malleable, flexible, and open to newcomers (Furnivall 1948). The late eighteenth-century Burmese conquest of Arakan in 1784 triggered the first major wave of Muslim displacement, with many fleeing to British Bengal for protection. When the British later annexed Burma in 1885 and incorporated it into British India, they encouraged labor migration from Bengal to work in Arakan's agricultural sector, significantly increasing the Muslim population. This colonial-era migration intensified ethnic and religious tensions, particularly during World War II, when communal violence erupted between pro-Japanese Buddhist Arakanese and Muslim Arakanese fighting alongside the British forces. Following Burma's independence, the Muslim population's failed attempts to join East Pakistan led to decades of systematic discrimination by successive military governments. The newly adopted "Rohingya" ethnic identity emerged during the 1950s–60s as Muslims in Arakan sought political recognition and self-determination. However, this period marked the beginning of severe restrictions on Rohingya participation in political, educational, and economic life, effectively rendering hundreds of thousands stateless and triggering multiple mass expulsions to Bangladesh throughout the twentieth century.

The ongoing persecution has created a vast Rohingya diaspora, with hundreds of thousands fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh and establishing refugee camps there. Beyond Bangladesh, large communities have formed in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, where Rohingya often live as undocumented workers or temporary labor migrants without legal status. Malaysia has become a significant destination due to its proximity and existing Muslim

communities, though most Rohingya there face precarious circumstances without official recognition or protection, adding further hardship to their displacement experience, as I will elaborate on in subsequent chapters below. The Rohingya case exemplifies how the transformation of ethnic identities under colonialism and the movement of peoples and borders have lasting effects. While the historical evidence shows that Rohingya can trace their historical roots in the region to the Arakan kingdom, a Buddhist kingdom heavily influenced by neighboring Islamic sultanates, this heritage is continually questioned and denied in modern Myanmar. It is important to remember how porous and malleable borders have historically been, and how easily they have been traversed and settled by various peoples. The closing of borders, their securitization, and the expulsion of people no longer deemed part of the body politic are profoundly modern phenomena.

CHIN: MISSIONARY INFLUENCE AND LINGUISTIC FRAGMENTATION

The Chin experience, meanwhile, reflects the complex interaction between pre-colonial ethnic identity, colonial administrative systems, and missionary linguistic policies. While the name “Chin” has ancient origins reaching back around 1,000 years and was used “from the very beginning not only by the Chin themselves but also by neighboring peoples, such as the Kachin, Shan and Burman” (Sakhong 2003, 3), British colonial authorities fundamentally reshaped how this identity was administratively organized and linguistically standardized. The British established administrative systems that consolidated what the Chin scholar Sakhong (2003, 17) identifies as “six major tribal groups of the Chin, namely the 1) Asho, 2) Chó or Sho, 3) Khuami or M’ro, 4) Laimi, 5) Mizo (Lushai) and 6) Zomi” under unified administrative structures. Historical evidence shows that “the Chin were known by no other name than CHIN until they made their settlement in ‘Chin Nwe’” but subsequently “split into different tribal groups with different tribal names and dialects” after their dispersal from the Chindwin Valley (Sakhong 2003, 16–17). Much like across the British Empire, the Chin Hills were administered using both the classic divide-and-rule and the British classification system to split peoples into convenient ethnic and religious identities and make them legible to the colonial administrative system. The British implemented the Circle Administration system, which divided the Chin Hills into bounded and defined territories and diminished existing indigenous systems of governance. Alongside the governmental reordering, the British amalgamated several local groups into a unified Chin identity with a singu-

lar legal system (Sakhong 2003, 102). After political unification, the British attempted to enforce linguistic unification by making the Laizo dialect the sole language for all education.

The arrival of American missionaries in the late nineteenth century created a new unifying force among these diverse communities. Christian conversion became widespread, transforming formerly animist tribes and creating the foundation for a modern Chin identity centered around evangelical Christianity. This religious transformation became both a source of unity and a target for later persecution by Myanmar's Buddhist-majority state, dynamics that are crucial for understanding how Chin refugees navigate religious networks in Malaysia. However, missionary politics also intervened to maintain linguistic difference, for example, under Rev. J. H. Cope, who became influential in local policymaking on education for both the Christian mission and the colonial power. He "insisted on the use of three dialects, or what came to be known as the three standard dialects: Kamhau dialect, Lai (Haka) dialect and Laizo (Falam) dialect" (Sakhong 2003, 167). Debates continue over whether a single lingua franca or a common dialect would have been (and may still be) a key unifying element in the political struggle, or whether diversity must persist to strengthen regional and local identities.

The colonial period created divergent experiences among Chin tribal groups. Notably, "the Zomi from the Tiddim and Tawnzang areas followed the orders of the British colonial power and sent men to France during World War I" as a labor corps, while groups like the Laimi "fought the war at home" during the Anglo-Chin War of 1917–19 (Sakhong 2003, 160–61). These different experiences contributed to distinct postwar trajectories and have influenced contemporary debates about identity and nomenclature, particularly regarding claims about "Zo" versus "Chin" identity. Today, "Chin" functions as both a state-designated ethnic category with deep historical roots and an administrative term that encompasses significant internal diversity. The tension between this overarching identity and sub-group identities continues to manifest in contemporary debates about nomenclature and representation, complicated by the colonial legacy of both administrative consolidation and linguistic fragmentation that has persisted into the post-independence period.

The British Empire's approach to managing plural societies has left lasting impacts across Southeast Asia and beyond. Plural societies, such as Malaysia and Myanmar, had their populace systematically categorized so the British colonial power could better control and rule them (Furnivall 1948). The colonial census emerged as a particularly powerful tool, with lasting

consequences: identities that were once malleable and relatively open became closed, and their boundaries were policed. The Myanmar government continues to use these imperial tools of divide and conquer to classify and control its population, albeit with diminishing success after the 2021 coup.

CONTEMPORARY DISPLACEMENT DYNAMICS AND SETTLEMENT PRACTICES

Contemporary persecution and displacement patterns reflect these deep historical roots while taking on new dimensions of violence and exclusion culminating in what scholars term systematic persecution amounting to genocide (Green et al. 2015). Legal exclusion began with the 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively rendered them stateless by classifying them as foreign residents rather than citizens (Human Rights Watch 2000). This legal framework was built upon colonial-era arguments about Bengali immigration to justify contemporary exclusion. Recent violence has dramatically intensified displacement pressures. The 2012 communal clashes in Rakhine State resulted in thousands of deaths and widespread displacement, predominantly affecting Rohingya communities (Physicians for Human Rights 2013). These conflicts created lasting trauma that extends beyond Myanmar's borders, affecting refugee communities even in places of supposed safety.

The systematic nature of persecution encompasses multiple dimensions: legal exclusion, economic marginalization, restrictions on movement and education, and periodic outbreaks of severe violence (Fortify Rights 2014). This multifaceted oppression has created sustained displacement pressures affecting multiple generations of Rohingya families. Chin displacement primarily stems from religious persecution and military oppression targeting Christian minorities. Myanmar's military has systematically attacked Christian symbols and religious leaders, with many refugees reporting specific incidents involving the destruction of crosses and persecution of pastors (Chin Human Rights Organization 2012a). This religious targeting reflects broader policies of forced assimilation that seek to homogenize Myanmar's diverse population under Buddhist-Bamar dominance. Military oppression takes multiple forms, including forced labor and conscription into porter service; the latter involves compelling civilians to carry heavy supplies across mountainous terrain under harsh conditions, often accompanied by physical abuse and inadequate provisions (Shan Human Rights Foundation 2002). Many who have fled Myanmar to Malaysia describe escaping during these forced labor assignments.

Active conflict between ethnic armies and Myanmar's military has created additional displacement pressures. Many stories of flight from Chin State describe how ordinary villagers became caught in the crossfire between the Chin National Army and government forces. For example, Van and Ruth, a couple I stayed with for several weeks, described how, in the early 2000s, fighting in their area led to the widespread conscription of local men for porter duties, forcing them to eventually flee to Thailand and later Malaysia.

At the time, they were living in a small hamlet not far from Hakha, the capital of Chin State. Their lives were increasingly shaped by the intensifying conflict between the Chin National Army and the Myanmar military. The Chin Hills were and remain contested territory. The Myanmar Army maintained an extensive military presence there, with bases occupying strategic mountain ridges from which they conducted extensive patrols. The Chin National Front (CNF) operated in the same areas, establishing bases near civilian villages. Van and Ruth's community found itself in trouble as both armed groups demanded money, food, and labor from the villagers.

The Myanmar Army commandeered local men for portering duties, forcing them to carry heavy military supplies and 25-kilogram bags of rice through steep mountainous terrain. Porters faced beatings and were given substandard and insufficient food. Thus, many who survived these assignments fled at the first opportunity rather than face re-conscription. When fighting escalated in their area and men from a nearby village were conscripted for porter duty, the couple decided to run, not wanting Van to be next. With only hours to prepare, they packed essentials and left their village, heading first to the central city of Mandalay and then onwards to Yangon. There, a contact from a childhood friend connected them with a smuggling agent. They did not trust the first agent and settled on an agent who had successfully brought a family member to Malaysia. Their journey involved multiple stages: a van journey through southeastern Myanmar, a difficult jungle trek across the Myanmar-Thai border with about 20 people guided by two smugglers, another van journey through Thailand, a second arduous trek across the Thai-Malaysian border, and finally transport by car to Kuala Lumpur.

Migration routes to Malaysia reflect both the constraints imposed by persecution and the opportunities created by existing networks and geographical proximity. Rohingya migration to Malaysia predominantly involves dangerous sea crossings across the Andaman Sea, often aboard overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels (Hoffstaedter and Missbach 2022). These journeys frequently begin as consensual smuggling arrangements but transform into trafficking situations as costs escalate and passengers become captive to

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Malaysia hosts one of Southeast Asia's largest urban refugee populations, yet grants them no legal standing at all: tolerated in practice, forbidden in law. *Lives in Limbo* asks how people build durable lives inside that contradiction.

Drawing on more than a decade of ethnographic fieldwork and over eighty interviews with Chin and Rohingya refugees in and around Kuala Lumpur, Gerhard Hoffstaedter traces Malaysia's "protection paradox": an economy that depends on refugee labor even as the state denies refugees rights or recognition. Rather than passive victims, refugees appear here as active makers of belonging, community, and identity, in wet markets and informal farms, church halls and football pitches.

Applying a "polycrisis" framework that captures how legal, economic, health, and social precarities compound one another, as COVID-19 starkly revealed, the book offers a rigorous, humane account of protracted displacement in a country outside the international refugee regime, essential reading for scholars of migration, urban anthropology, and Southeast Asian studies.

GERHARD HOFFSTAEDTER is a political anthropologist in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland and co-lead of the Maritime Refugee Lab. His research focuses on the hidden dimensions of refugee life in Southeast Asia, from statelessness and clandestine maritime journeys to the everyday negotiations of belonging. He is author of *Modern Muslim Identities: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia* (NIAS/NUS Press) and has published widely on forced migration and religion-state relations in Southeast Asia.