

Types and Strategies for Addressing Population Security Issues in Border Areas of Yunnan within the Context of High-Quality Population Development

Yang Xiao

Marxism College, Yunnan Open University, Kunming, China

Abstract: The high-quality development of the population in border areas of Yunnan is crucial for promoting frontier prosperity and stability, achieving common prosperity, and advancing the modernization of border areas. Currently, these areas are experiencing expanding areas of population decline and a noticeable outflow of people from ethnic minority villages. They also face challenges such as low levels of education and health literacy, weak human capital, imbalanced age and gender demographics, and a significant influx of foreign individuals entering for employment without proper regulation. By advancing urbanization in key border towns and constructing economic belts in these border areas, this study aims to spearhead revitalization through industry, thereby fostering economic and social development in village and town communities. This will attract and encourage population return. Orienting towards high quality, we aim to enhance the functional influence of border ports, elevate the development level of border openness, and promote regional coordinated development, thereby creating a sustainable development momentum for Yunnan's border areas.

Keywords: Border Prosperity; Population Security; Human Capital; Border Areas of Yunnan

1. The Need for Vigilance and Importance of Addressing Population Security Issues in Yunnan's Border Areas

Population issues have always been a comprehensive, long-term, and strategic challenge for China. In May 2023, during the first meeting of the 20th Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission, the state leader emphasized that "population development is significant for the great rejuvenation of the

Chinese nation. We must focus on improving the overall quality of the population to support Chinese-style modernization". Hence, high-quality population development has been established as the guiding principle and direction for population work in the new era, becoming an essential choice for advancing progress and breakthroughs in Chinese-style modernization.

The concept of "population security", initially proposed by Zhang Weiqing, examines the nature, influence, and consequences of various population issues from a security perspective. [1] It transcends and elevates the traditional thinking on population issues, providing value judgments and a securitization framework aimed at enhancing awareness, prevention, and response capabilities regarding threats posed by population concerns. [2] Population security issues primarily manifest in the relationships between factors such as population quantity, quality, health, structure, and distribution, and their impact on security. [3] Under the framework of national comprehensive security, population security constitutes an essential component and is a foundational element for national security and regional socio-economic development. [4] The border regions inhabited by ethnic groups, as spaces for residents' production and living, have consistently been focal points of governmental attention and academic research, particularly concerning population stock, flow, and structure. Yunnan serves as China's gateway to Southeast and South Asia, with its border areas extending from Funing County in Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in the east to Gongshan County in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture in the northwest, spanning regions bordering Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. This area encompasses eight border prefectures and 25 border counties, playing a crucial role in optimizing regional layouts, safeguarding

border security, and contributing to the country's aims of building a model zone for ethnic unity and progress, a leader in ecological civilization, and a strategic hub radiating towards South and Southeast Asia. Presently, Yunnan's border areas face numerous population risks arising directly or indirectly from changes and interactions among population variables such as total population, quality, structure, and migration. It is imperative for all stakeholders to remain vigilant and attentive to these issues. Addressing the population security challenges in Yunnan's border areas from the strategic perspective of promoting high-quality population development to drive border modernization holds significant practical importance for advancing prosperity and stability, achieving common prosperity, and furthering the modernization of border areas.

2. Current Types of Population Security Issues in Yunnan's Border Areas

2.1 Expanding Areas of Population Decline and Noticeable Outflow from Ethnic Minority Villages

Population size is foundational to the security of border areas. On one hand, this is reflected in the role border residents play in upholding national sovereignty and securing and developing the borders. Their unique identity, rights, and responsibilities make them the primary societal force for safeguarding national territory. On the other hand, the Marxist view on population suggests that a certain population increase is a prerequisite for economic and social prosperity. Typically, the wealth generated by individuals throughout their lifetimes surpasses what they consume. Overall, population outflow has become a primary factor affecting population security in China's border areas. The State document *National Population Development Plan (2016-2030)* noted a significant loss of young adults in some border areas. Compared to regions at risk of rapid population decline and outflow, like the northeastern provinces and central and eastern Inner Mongolia, Yunnan's border areas experience relatively stable net population outflow, exerting limited impact on local demographics. However, the clear trend of outflow in Yunnan's border areas presents population security risks that warrant attention. Based on data from the three national censuses since 2000 and the annual Yunnan Statistical

Yearbooks, the period from 2000 to 2010 saw four border counties in Yunnan undergoing population decline. These are Zhenkang, Gengma, and Cangyuan in Lincang City, and Menglian in Pu'er City. [5] Menglian County experienced the most severe population loss, with its population dropping from 208,593 in the fifth census to 135,538 in the sixth, showing an average annual growth rate of -4.223%. In terms of geographic impact, the Lincang border area was most affected, while Menglian County witnessed the largest numerical decrease, losing 70,000 people in a decade. The Pu'er and Lincang areas along the China-Myanmar border were among the first to experience significant outflows. After 2010, most border counties in Yunnan transitioned from marginal growth rates (below 1%) to population decline. From the sixth to the seventh census (2010 to 2020), aside from nine border counties (or cities) that managed positive population growth, the other 16 counties (or cities) showed negative growth. This included counties on the China-Vietnam border (Lyuchun, Jinping, Hekou, Malipo, Maguan, Funing), the China-Laos border (Ximeng, Jiangcheng, Lancang), and the China-Myanmar border (Yingjiang, Tengchong, Longling, Longchuan, Cangyuan, Zhenkang, Gengma). Maguan County experienced the largest decline, its population dropping from 367,507 to 318,704—a loss of nearly 50,000 in ten years. Notably, all border counties within Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Baoshan City, and Lincang City faced population declines. These statistics reflect the expanding scope and severity of negative population growth and outmigration trends in Yunnan's border areas since the turn of the 21st century.

From a spatial perspective, the border areas of Yunnan currently have a relatively low population density. Data indicates that the 25 border counties (or cities) constitute 23.4% of the province's total area, contribute approximately 11% to its GDP, and account for about 14.3% of its population. The population density in these areas is 73.1 people per square kilometer, which is only 61% of the provincial average. [6] This low density of population and economic activity is linked to Yunnan's economic development status and the long-term population outflow from these borders.

The reasons behind this trend involve the

siphoning effects of regional development imbalances and the economic logic driving individuals or groups to leave their registered residences for education, employment, and other opportunities in economically developed areas along rivers, coasts, and urban centers. Meanwhile, most of the outflowing population has transitioned to becoming modern industrial workers and urban residents, making it unlikely for them to return to their border villages—leading to a significant reduction in the resident population in these regions. Additionally, to address poverty alleviation and development issues, many border villages with harsh living conditions have been entirely relocated to more favorable basin areas under government-led initiatives. Resettled villagers often need to shift their livelihoods from traditional agriculture to wage-based economies due to a lack of industrial support, driving further population outflow. Consequently, while urbanization and relocation efforts have concentrated populations, they have also inadvertently facilitated further migration away from border areas.

2.2 Low Levels of Education and Health Literacy, Weak Overall Human Capital in Border Areas

The quality of human capital refers to the knowledge and skills embodied in the workforce, influenced by enrollment rates, average years of education, levels of education attained, training, lifelong learning, and health standards, all stemming from human capital investment. This quality is crucial for fostering sustained economic growth, with education investment serving as a vital means of acquiring human capital. Undeniably, over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, Yunnan's border areas, home to ethnic minorities, have achieved remarkable modernization progress. In 2014, the State document issued the *National New Urbanization Plan (2014-2020)*, providing strategic guidance for Yunnan's border urbanization. However, the overall urbanization level remains low, constrained by a dominant traditional agricultural economy, sluggish non-agricultural sector growth, and inadequate public goods and services. As of the end of 2020, the urbanization rates of Yunnan's border areas were as follows: Wenshan Prefecture at 37.2%, Honghe Prefecture at 47.7%, Xishuangbanna Prefecture at 47.07%, Pu'er City

at 40.53%, Lincang City at 35.08%, Dehong Prefecture at 48.94%, Baoshan City at 35.09%, and Nujiang Prefecture at 52.35%. Urban areas serve as vital spaces for population and industry concentration, playing a critical role in promoting social integration, identity building, and stable development. Yet, currently, urbanization efforts in Yunnan's border areas struggle to attract residents for local employment or settlement. Consequently, border residents, who possess certain knowledge and skills crucial for land stewardship, are driven by economic motivations to seek opportunities in inland urban centers. Those remaining in border villages are predominantly young, elderly, isolated, or impoverished, further diminishing human capital quality. The resultant series of issues could even threaten national security and border stability.

Moreover, the education level among ethnic minorities in Yunnan's border areas remains generally weak and significantly behind compared to inland regions, due to systemic, structural, ideological, content, and methodological limitations. Census data reveals a low proportion of the population with high school education or above. Yunnan's educational attainment is among the lowest nationwide. Although the proportion of the population with primary education among those aged six and above decreased from 49.65% in the fifth census to 46.95% in the sixth, it still accounts for nearly half of the educated population. Field research has shown that in some villages with over 100 households, only one university student has emerged to date, and many people drop out before finishing middle school, often even elementary school. This dropout issue is largely related to economic backwardness, cultural lag, and unequal distribution of educational resources. Such dropouts can be attributed to "poverty-induced dropouts". Additionally, a unique phenomenon of "wealth-induced dropouts" also exists in Yunnan's border areas. Unlike students who leave school because of financial hardship, these students come from affluent families. Influenced by societal beliefs that undervalue education or by the allure of high income and consumption, they voluntarily or are pressured to abandon the compulsory nine years of education or to forgo higher education opportunities.

In addition, inadequate vocational training in Yunnan's border areas significantly contributes to the low levels of human capital. For border areas dominated by ethnic minorities and reliant on agriculture, vocational education tailored to ethnic characteristics is crucial for their development. However, the proportion of people receiving job training in these border areas is below the national average. The lack of quality higher education institutions and research facilities further impedes the cultivation of high-caliber talent locally. Applied universities in Yunnan's border areas face bottlenecks in developing high-tech talent due to students' weak foundational knowledge and the need to improve teaching quality. This hampers the enhancement of students' academic and professional skills, affecting the overall quality of human capital. The deficient infrastructure and limited government finances in these border areas fail to attract high-quality talent. Consequently, even those educated in local applied universities often migrate to towns or cities inland for employment. The outflow of individuals with more than a middle school education exacerbates the low human capital levels, fundamentally depriving the border areas of the ability to sustain and develop high-quality human capital resources.

Furthermore, factors such as economic underdevelopment, complex terrain, diverse climate, and low health awareness contribute to relatively poor health levels among ethnic minorities in Yunnan's border areas. In the course of health-related poverty alleviation, the inconvenience of medical access often results in diseases going untreated, leading to poverty caused by illness. In a village surveyed in Yunnan's border area, severe health issues such as sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS emerge from drug trafficking. Young addicts, bedridden and gravely affected physically and mentally, deteriorate until death, leaving behind vulnerable children and elderly individuals who endure in isolation.

2.3 Imbalanced Age and Gender Structures, Potential Security Risks Present

Population structure, as a result of demographic classification, reflects the quantitative relationships within a population, primarily age and gender structure. [7] These dynamics significantly impact the local economy, society, and demographic development. Under the

pressures of industrialization and modernization, Yunnan's border areas face structural challenges, such as a decline in the working-age and childbearing female population, an increasing aging population, a decreasing total fertility rate, and a lower birth rate.

Research has revealed that while the young and adult populations in Yunnan's border areas expand at a decelerating rate, the age structure is rapidly aging, with a rising proportion of elderly residents in border villages. Census data corroborates these findings. For instance, ethnic groups such as the Naxi and Bai, which previously had the youngest population structures, transitioned to an aging society within just a decade. Currently, none of Yunnan's unique ethnic groups maintain a youthful age structure; all are moving toward an aging demographic. This shift is accelerating with changes in the types of population reproduction. The imbalance in age structure, marked by a large elderly population, may pose risks to social stability and national security.

Concurrently, population aging is accompanied by increasingly prominent structural issues such as the nuclearization and empty-nest phenomenon of families in Yunnan's border areas. Driven by industrial development and urbanization, more young people are either choosing or being compelled to leave their native homes and parents to pursue opportunities elsewhere, lacking the time and energy to care for the elderly. This results in a rising degree of familial empty-nesting, which has evolved into a notable new social phenomenon and issue.

Furthermore, the decreasing proportion of women in Yunnan's border areas has led to an imbalance in the sex ratio, highlighting a significant demographic issue. Since the late 20th century, due to increased mobility, more women have moved to urban centers for work, guided by economic incentives. This outflow has diminished the local female population, particularly the loss of young women, hindering population growth. Driven by a combination of economic factors and the "transmission of the marriage squeeze to poor border areas", many young women who leave for work develop new perspectives on relationships and often choose not to return to rural areas, exacerbating the gender imbalance. This has resulted in a ratio significantly skewed compared to urban areas. The growing number

of "leftover men", alongside rising bride prices and wedding costs, has led to increased occurrences of illegal marriages and cross-border unions. Field studies in Bada Township, Mengla County, Xishuangbanna, and Xiaodenghan Village in Ruili, Dehong, reveal a severe trend of female outflow. Similarly, in Tianpeng and Muyang at the Sino-Vietnamese border, many women leave for work or marry out, leading to a high number of unmarried men remaining. Overall, the imbalance in age and gender demographics in Yunnan's border areas poses significant potential security risks, which are deeply concerning.

2.4 Influx of Foreign Workers Brings Opportunities and Challenges

Yunnan's cross-border economic zones share boundaries with Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, resulting in frequent exchanges and significant cross-border migration. According to border inspection data since 2017, approximately 30 million people cross annually. Among them, Myanmar nationals comprise about 80% (over 24 million), Vietnamese nationals around 17% (more than 4.9 million), and nationals from Laos or stateless individuals about 3% (over 1 million). In 2018, the province recorded 45.84 million border crossings, marking a 46.92% increase from the previous year. Of these, 30.38 million were Myanmar nationals, reflecting a 51.92% rise. That year, eight border prefectures issued 270,000 residence permits, with over 70% granted to Myanmar nationals. Foreign nationals are predominantly concentrated in six border cities: Jinghong, Mangshi, Ruili, Tengchong, Lushui, and Hekou County. There is a significant presence in towns near border checkpoints like Tianbao, Dulong, Hekou, Jinshuihe, Mengkang, Mohan, Daluo, Mengding, Wanding, Ruili, and Tengchong. Many foreign traders and workers are settled in these towns. In suburban areas with good transportation, Myanmar nationals often rent affordable rooms at 200-300 yuan per month. In nearby border villages, seasonal workers engage in timber processing, while farmers work in sugarcane, banana, and watermelon cultivation. The significant influx of foreign workers is primarily due to the dual labor market in Yunnan's border areas. Supported by the nation's policy of opening up, these areas have experienced rapid economic and social development, leading to increased labor demand.

Local workers often gravitate towards higher-tier jobs in sectors like live streaming sales that offer better pay, security, and a comfortable environment. This shift leaves labor-intensive industries such as low-end manufacturing and service sectors reliant on foreign labor to fill the gap. For Chinese employers, hiring foreign workers is relatively cost-effective, especially in labor-intensive industries, significantly reducing production costs. For foreign workers, China provides a more developed economy, better job opportunities, superior working conditions, and higher wages.

However, it is essential to note that the influx of Myanmar workers seeking development opportunities in China's border areas has, to some extent, appropriated resources from local labor markets. This has compressed the lower-tier labor market, impacting job opportunities and wage levels for domestic workers. Many local workers who remain, due to personal development needs, find their job prospects diminished, forcing them to seek employment elsewhere and exacerbating population loss in these areas. Additionally, Myanmar workers might carry pathogens like influenza, tuberculosis, and dengue fever during their migration, with inadequate living conditions and sanitation intensifying the risk of disease spread. Consequently, the frequent movement of people significantly increases the risk of importing major infectious diseases, posing greater challenges to public health and safety in border areas. Moreover, with the complex topography and extensive borderlines, there is frequent and informal cross-border movement between neighboring villages from both countries. Many foreign workers do not possess the appropriate work permits or register their personal information with relevant authorities, with some employers lacking awareness of these requirements. This situation complicates the Chinese government's ability to manage the foreign workforce and allocate human resources properly, potentially creating security risks that affect local residents and social stability, thereby posing a burden on both government and society.

3. Recommendations for Addressing Population Security Issues in Yunnan's Border Areas

3.1 Advancing Urbanization in Border Nodes to Build an Economic Belt That Attracts and Preserves Human Capital

3.1.1 Enhancing infrastructure development

Greater support for economic growth in border areas appears crucial, particularly focusing on infrastructure such as transportation and information technology to reduce time-space distances. Developing and perfecting modern logistics services, and creating a new international logistics system oriented towards South and Southeast Asia, are considered essential. The exploration of innovative models like smart ports and border cities should align with the nation's long-term development strategy.

3.1.2 Implementing clear planning and industrial policies

It is essential to focus on key nodes and priority villages and towns in border areas, fostering their development. By supporting these areas through national policies, we aim to cultivate a number of export processing zones, bonded areas, and economic cooperation zones. This strategic approach will effectively slow local population outflow and attract significant inbound migration, enhancing human capital concentration. Additionally, the widespread adoption of smart city concepts should be promoted using IoT, big data analytics, and AI to boost urban management efficiency and effectiveness. This will increase the appeal of border regions and support sustainable development.

3.1.3 Enhancing the quality and efficiency of public services

Optimization of Educational Resource Allocation: The establishment and refinement of educational systems, along with the integration of high-quality resources, enhance education standards. Collaborations with surrounding educational institutions and businesses provide opportunities for exchange programs, allowing residents to gain hands-on experience and improve their skills. Improved living conditions and increased income levels contribute to greater material security for healthier lifestyles. **Advancement of Healthcare Services:** Investment in healthcare facilities often leads to improved service quality. Telemedicine systems, utilizing modern information technology, offer professional medical consultations and services to remote areas. **Strengthening the Social Security System:** The refinement of social

insurance and assistance mechanisms provides comprehensive protection, enhancing residents' sense of security and belonging. Robust systems for elderly care, healthcare, and education help alleviate familial burdens and improve overall quality of life and happiness. **Facilitation of Administrative Efficiency Reforms:** Simplified administrative procedures contribute to enhanced governmental service efficiency, creating a business-friendly environment that attracts enterprises and talent.

3.2 Harnessing Industry Revitalization to Propel Economic and Social Development in Border Villages and Towns, Encouraging Return Migration

3.2.1 Development of local specialty agriculture, tourism, and cultural industries

Embracing the concepts of innovation, coordination, sustainability, openness, and shared growth, with a focus on local resources, aims to advance the integration of primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. Efforts to cultivate industries such as high-altitude specialty modern agriculture, tourism and cultural sectors, biopharmaceuticals and health, modern logistics, information technology, food and consumer goods manufacturing, advanced equipment manufacturing, and new materials are prioritized. Yunnan's border areas benefit from a diverse climate and fertile soils suitable for a variety of crops. Advancing specialty agriculture, such as tea, coffee, and tropical fruits, can attract agricultural and management professionals, enhancing local income levels and encouraging population influx. Leveraging Yunnan's natural and cultural resources to develop tourism and ethnic handicrafts creates employment opportunities and draws in both people and capital.

3.2.2 In-depth tourism development

Emphasizing local heritage brands, such as leveraging the cultural history of the expeditionary forces in Western Yunnan and the unique cross-border ethnic cultures of the Dai, Wa, and Lahu peoples in Southwest Yunnan, as well as the Miao, Zhuang, and Yao peoples in Southeast Yunnan. This strategy involves creating distinctive and diverse tourism products supported by high-quality services. Additionally, by capitalizing on the ecological advantages of border villages, efforts can be made to develop the Yunnan border tourism corridor, with enhanced infrastructure like

transportation and healthcare, which can foster retirement and border-specific tourism industries. Establishing industry bases in these villages, including for authentic medicinal herbs, cold-resistant breeding, and unique art such as rock paintings, fish skin art, and woodblock prints, as well as paleontological sites featuring dinosaurs and mammoths, can create new growth points for the economic development of border regions.

3.2.3 Selective cultivation of distinctive and well-positioned industrial players

The targeted introduction of financially strong, technologically advanced, innovative, and trustworthy enterprises with distinct industrial features is advocated. Following thorough research, analysis, and planning, the most suitable local specialty industries are chosen as key pillars. Priority support and expansion of these industrial clusters help solidify the economic foundation. Form a reasonable industrial structure, refine the upstream and downstream products of characteristic industries, vigorously develop new products, highlight product characteristics, create their own characteristic industrial brands, develop deep processing, and extend the industrial chain.

3.3 Utilizing Border Opening Advantages to Attract Chinese and International Human Capital

3.3.1 Accelerating the construction of international corridors and deepening connectivity with neighboring countries

Yunnan's unique geographic position makes it a crucial bridge connecting China with South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean region. Advancing connectivity with neighboring countries is pivotal not only for fostering a comprehensive new opening-up landscape but also as a major pathway for swiftly advancing the Belt and Road Initiative. Enhanced connectivity with neighboring nations will facilitate trade and personnel exchanges in border areas. Although significant progress has been made through road, rail, and air infrastructure development in recent years, meeting national strategic demands and achieving high-quality growth require continuous investment and improvement in connectivity.

3.3.2 Expanding opportunities for international cooperation to attract resources and investment

By fostering increased interaction and

cooperation with neighboring countries and regions in the fields of economy, culture, and technology, more external resources and investment can be attracted to border areas. Introducing advanced technologies, management expertise, and talented individuals from both domestic and international sources can propel industrial upgrades and enhance innovation capabilities in these regions. Such openness and collaboration can also provide more employment opportunities and entrepreneurial platforms for local residents, encouraging population mobility and improving the employment structure. Moreover, it's essential to focus on the internal coordination of development within border areas. While advancing open cooperation, strengthening collaboration and exchange between different regions within border areas can create a synergistic development pattern, promoting balanced internal growth, reducing regional disparities, and achieving high-quality population development.

3.3.3 Developing international human resources through open cooperation

In the China-Myanmar border region, the legal entry of Burmese nationals has become a crucial labor resource, driving the development and opening of these border areas. This has significant positive implications for the economic and social advancement of China's frontier ethnic regions. Consequently, it is essential to improve services and management for these populations by integrating governance with guidance and training. This approach will ensure the orderly and legal movement of Burmese nationals, promote intercultural communication and integration, and support national strategies for strengthening and enriching border areas, thereby enhancing China's economic and social growth.

3.4 Investing in Education, Healthcare, and Vocational Training to Enhance the Skills and Comprehensive Abilities of Local Residents, Improving Human Capital across the Region

3.4.1 Expansion of educational and healthcare resources

An increased investment in education supports raising educational standards in border areas, alongside vocational training to improve the skill levels of the local workforce, which provides essential talent for regional industries.

Healthcare investments in ethnic minority regions along Yunnan's borders ensure that residents can access timely and effective medical services.

3.4.2 The development and implementation of targeted educational programs and public health policies aligning with local needs

Training programs in fields such as agricultural technology, small business management, tourism services, and cross-border trade contribute to improving dietary habits and nutrition among local populations. Enhancements in educational attainment and vocational skills allow residents to strengthen their competitiveness in the job market, lessening the necessity for seeking employment elsewhere.

3.4.3 Strengthening internship and employment training

Collaborations with educational institutions and enterprises in surrounding regions offer exchange programs that present locals with internship and job prospects, aiding in the acquisition and refinement of practical skills. Improved living conditions and increased income levels contribute more significantly to a healthier lifestyle.

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