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

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 7 April 2016
Received in revised form 26 October 2016
Accepted 2 February 2017

Keywords:
Popular geopolitics
Geoeconomics
Geographies of affect
Geographies of emotion
Celebrity humanitarianism
Burma/Myanmar
Thailand

A B S T R A C T

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

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1. Introduction

In celebration of World Refugee Day in June of 2014, UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie visited several refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Part of her efforts to draw attention to ongoing human rights abuses in Burma, her day-long visit attracted international media coverage and was applauded by UNHCR for the worldwide attention it drew. Since 2002 Jolie has made four visits to camps in the border area—home to approximately 130,000 Burmese exiles (Myint-U, 2011; Rogers, 2012; UNHCR, 2013). Representing one of the longest lasting displacement situations in the world, the nine refugee camps—officially referred to by UNHCR as temporary shelters—along the Thai-Burma border have been in operation since the 1980s (Callahan, 1996; Fink, 2001; Hyndman, 2002; UNHCR, 2013; Vogler, 2007). Recent reports of Rohingya Muslims—described by the U.N. as the most persecuted minority in the world—trapped on boats in the Andaman Sea has increased international attention to ongoing violence in the country. The lifting of sanctions and the opening up of Burma to global capital since 2011 has generated widespread geoeconomic hope for the region as well as subdued many of the continued human rights issues in the country. Recent media attention to the Rohingya crisis has contributed to widespread critiques of Nobel Peace Prize recipient and the leader for the National League for Democracy Party, Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite the continued influx of Burmese exiles entering Thailand, including the persecuted Rohingya, UNHCR cancelled its refugee registration program in 2005. These silences are periodically punctuated by popular media attention to Jolie as well as other international celebrities such as Matt Dillon1 and celebrity journalists such as Nicholas Kristofn4. In 2014, the group resettlement program to the U.S.—by far the largest

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

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

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

1.1. Research site and methodological framework

Research for this paper took place in tea shops, restaurants,
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متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات