



Center for ASEAN Studies
Chiang Mai University

BORDER TWISTS and BURMA TRAJECTORIES

Perceptions, Reforms, and Adaptations

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Introduction

Samak Kosem

The chapters that compromise *Border Twists and Burma Trajectories* constitute an illuminating, multi-disciplinary set of spatial dynamics of the shared Burmese and Thai borderland with which to consider the lives of those inhabiting the border areas and their trajectories in the face of monumental political and socio-economic changes. In this context, ‘border twists’ can be conceptualized as the expression of agency of borderlanders in the midst of their encounters with struggles and practices via social dynamics. The phrase also refers to the intersections of borderlands, migration, and identity in dynamic geographical settings. The mobility of people within an enclosed space along the borders, and negotiation with the Thai state’s regulations following migration from Burma, allow those on the border some strategic flexibility in the management of cross-border activity.

The 2,000-kilometer-long Thai-Burma border is the crossroads where the Thai and Burmese states, capitalist enterprises, foreign interests, and international agencies come to interact with migrant communities and organizations (Balčaitė, 2014). For Thailand, the influx of displaced people from Burma presents an economic opportunity. The capacity of Thailand to develop its vibrant manufacturing and commercial agricultural sectors is based on migrant labor, while the benefits of the nation’s economic growth are intended solely for its own citizens. Migrant workers from Burma have managed to discover methods with which to attempt to rectify situations of inequality in some areas, including in the busy border districts of Mae Sot, Chiang Mai, and

Mae Hong Son (Kwanchewan, 2011).

The Thai state does not exercise administrative control along the border in consistent or conventional ways, and it has been left to a plethora of academics and researchers to attempt to accurately characterize the alternative forms of governance practiced there. Lee Sang Kook (2007), placing emphasis on the numerical majority of non-Thais in many border districts, relates ways in which border communities exercise some state-like functions within themselves, as well as manners in which local Thai authorities strategically chose not to apply laws and regulations from the center of the Thai state. He sees this as producing a hybrid regime, going so far as to suggest that it amounts to the existence of a 'state within a state.'

A piece of ethnographic research produced along the northern Thai-Burma border by Cadchumsang (2011) examines the emergence of ethnic identity and nationalistic consciousness of *Tai* (Shan) migrants from Burma's Shan State within the context of Thai nation-building and state development. Due to their informal, non-state sanctioned immigration practices, the Thai state classifies the migrants into various non-citizenship statuses. Cadchumsang's dissertation offers an investigation of the burgeoning *Tai* ethno-nationalism through three interconnected analyses at the levels of village or community, national, and transborder. Namely, the three analyses are concerned with the maintainence of ethnic boundaries, the reconstruction of identities and movement across borders, and the imagining of a nation of the *Tai* people.

Pitch Pongsawat (2007) develops Aihwa Ong's conception of 'flexible citizenship' in the case of Mae Sot with the additional concept of 'partial border citizenship' to characterize a sub-regime created by the Thai state in which an array of different limited rights are conferred on people in the area, according to the permutations of the times and the ways in which they or their forebears were supposed to have crossed the border and underwent (or did not undergo) one of several possible types of registration. Pongsawat's conclusion insists that rather than existing in

an anomalous limbo between legality and illegality, the statuses of migrant people from Burma in Mae Sot are concretely constructed by the Thai state for its own purposes. Arnold and Pickles (2011) also discuss ways in which other non-legal practices and omissions in Mae Sot are functional and beneficial for the Thai state.

An important dimension in each of the works discussed is that of the power and agency of the migrant people themselves. In the view of Lee Sang Kook (2007), this is substantial, posing a real challenge to the Thai state, which resorts to sharing governance. Pongsawat (2007) and Arnold and Pickles (2011), on the other hand, tend to represent the non-Thais merely as victims of a “state project in which migrant workers are racialized and their civic rights are peripheralized through the construction of a distinct bio-political regime of ‘partial border citizenship’” (Arnold & Pickles, 2011). The idea of rule by exception can be applied to the case of distribution of ‘official’ identification cards for migrants in Mae Sot, because it involves non-adherence to law and extraordinary departure from policy. But what would exception imply here in terms of a serious challenge to the state’s sovereign power, and the degree of power and agency attributable to other actors? Questions of such fundamental importance are among those considered by the authors included in this volume.

Burma trajectories: Civil society and the complex process of peace

Individuals and families in many communities across Burma, but most prevalently in ethnic border areas, continue to experience loss of home, land, livelihood, health, education, social security, and natural resources in the name of development supposedly for the people and poverty reduction. With the influx of international investors since the game-changing national elections of late 2010, one of the most significant problems citizens of the country have experienced is land insecurity, with over 500,000 acres of land having been appropriated by investment groups and the government. To date, the country’s nascent

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Land Acquisition Investigative Commission has received details of more than 2,000 land conflict cases.

In the first chapter of this book, “Burma – A Complex Peace,” Phil Thornton provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges facing Burma since the initiation of the quasi-civilian government’s reforms. Since 2010, many critics of the regime have acknowledged that the government has initiated welcomed reforms; however, many say these reforms have been orchestrated in well-planned stages in order to attract international attention and goodwill. Researchers such as Desmond Ball have stated their belief that the current situation will only get worse for ethnic peoples due to the rapid influx of development. Another major problem is the country’s healthcare situation. Before 2010, due to the general lack of initiative and efficiency from the government, private groups relied on their own efforts to provide healthcare to both locals and refugees in camps. Now with the influx of international aid organizations, Thornton draws attention to the concerns of those affiliated with established community-based medical groups who are concerned that foreign aid groups are only willing to work with the government while ignoring the progress local and ethnic groups have been making for years.

Lastly, the issue of refugees living in the nine camps that straddle the border and their possible repatriation draws the focus of Thornton. Many refugees have expressed their desire to remain in the camps rather than being repatriated back to Burma. To this day, Burmese textbooks categorize refugees as rebel families simply using the name of refugees to undermine the authority of the government. In fact, Thornton reports, refugees fear being returned home only to find that their land has already been repurposed, confiscated, or otherwise made unsafe for habitation. Overall, Thornton argues for the importance of UN agencies and international governments in ensuring that the voices of refugees are centered in any discussions about possible future repatriation.

In Hannah El-Silimy’s chapter, “Cycles of Violence and Conflict in

Burma and Civil Society's Role in Peacebuilding," the author offers insight regarding the various ways groups find to foster a 'us vs. them,' 'good vs. evil,' 'black and white' mentalities in communities. Importantly, El-Silimy's research highlights the need for a time of mourning and grieving following the cessation of conflict before entering into dialogue and considering avenues for forgiveness. As she states, "Forgiveness can cause more harm than healing." Her investigation of various international conflicts and how certain groups have rushed into the process of development without first acknowledging the trauma that the community has experienced is something to keep in mind for those whose interests or work focuses on reconciliation in Burma.

El-Silimy concludes her chapter by introducing a six-step process of breaking out of the cycle of violence and building lasting peace. First, the community must establish safety and support for conflicting parties. Second, a period of mourning and grieving must be observed before initiating dialogue in an attempt to begin processing the effects of deeply traumatic experiences. Third, the community can begin to acknowledge the root causes of the conflict by sharing diverse perspectives. The fourth step is a time of reconnection when conflicting parties come together to find ways to take risks and co-exist before continuing on to the next step of forgiveness. Lastly, the whole nation must come together to establish justice and institutionalize the newly conceptualized peace.

In the wake of the recent political liberalization of Myanmar, the nation is now experiencing a significant rise in funding opportunities for local NGOs and civil society organizations. However, this rise has come with its own fair share of problems. In developing countries such as Myanmar, the government and domestic donors often do not have funds to spare or are unwilling to risk criticism, and thus are reluctant to financially support grassroots, independent organizations. As a result, Myanmar continues to be severely dependent on foreign aid. In her chapter "Civil Society, Foreign Aid, and Donor Dependency in Transitional Myanmar," Maaike Matelski explains that following the

military government's inadequate response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and the announcement of elections in 2010, Myanmar saw an influx of foreign aid. However, the typical donor-recipient relationship has become skewed and imbalanced due to the fact that many donors to Myanmar choose to influence their beneficiaries in various ways, including through a preference for short-term projects over long-term programs, the use of complex English terms that confuse and sideline local staff, and assignment of highly-paid foreign consultants rather than local workers.

Matelski also draws comparisons between Myanmar and Cambodia in the sense that foreign aid to Myanmar reveals an absence of coordination, increased elitism, and a 'brain drain' from local organizations. This is evidenced by the increase in foreign aid workers that has essentially turned many locals from community workers into tour guides. Furthermore, because many local organizations cannot compete with international salaries, most locals end up leaving to work for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Lastly, Western donors have been criticised as relying too much on guidance from the central government such that they eventually fund ceasefire agreements and censuses. These cases are only a few examples of what has been referred to as "community blocking, not community building" and has led to a negative perception of INGOs in Myanmar. Matelski suggests alternatives that organizations in Burma could choose, such as through funding of local community organizations instead of government-linked organizations due to greater cost-effectiveness and accountability. Also suggested are alternate forms of income generation projects for local groups.

Border mobility of Shan migrants

In the late-twentieth century, most migrants from Burma came to Thailand as refugees due to domestic instability and widespread disregard for human rights. In the past 10 years, more and more migrants from

Burma have come to Thailand not solely due to displacement, but rather because they have been drawn by dreams of participating in Thailand's economic boom. Therefore, the authors of the chapters that make up the middle section of this book argue that the Shan community in Thailand should by necessity be considered multi-dimensionally as refugees, displaced persons, and economic migrants.

In her chapter "Shifting Forms of Mobility: Rethinking Shan Migration in Thailand," Busarin Lertchavalitsakul looks at the Shan people's mobility and migration patterns at the present time. The author argues that the change in migration forms shows an evolution from being one of forced migration to one more of free-will with migrants having diverse options and the capacity to make their own decisions. This study relies on first-hand accounts to reveal how cross-border networks have manifested over time due to shifting migration patterns and local situations. The author categorizes Shan migrants as either short-term or long-term migrants. However, she warns that these two distinct categories should not be independently researched.

Long-term and short-term migrants have begun working together within intricate systems of kin relations, personal connections, reciprocity, illegal taxing systems, and even bribery of state and non-state actors on both sides of the border. Many short-term migrants nowadays are able to work in Thailand for a self-determined period of time before returning to Burma. In the event that workers desire to visit their hometowns in Shan State, this can be facilitated by long-term migrants involved in cross-border transportation. Therefore, Busarin concludes by stating that recent migrant activity from Burma should be thought of as being driven not only by political repercussions, but also for individual and personal reasons.

Garrett Kostin, in his chapter "The Shan in Thailand: Contentious Approaches to the Management of Refugees," sheds light on the onerous situations and choices endured by Shan people who have found themselves in Thailand for various reasons. Due to the political and

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ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, multiple ethnic groups have been provided refugee status and protections from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which allows them to reside in refugee camps and eventually seek refuge in third-party countries. However, the Shan are not eligible for such recognition as successive Thai governments have argued that due to their linguistic and cultural similarities with the Thai populace, the Shan are better categorized as temporary migrant workers. The Thai government has come under criticism for this position as many accuse the state of exploiting the Shan as a cheap and disposable workforce.

Kostin further offers two astute analyses on both sides of the Shan debate through the lenses of various theories of social justice. On one hand, he considers the question of the right of the Shan to attain UNHCR recognition from an egalitarian perspective. If the Thai government were to advocate egalitarian social policies making it possible for all people to fully participate and contribute towards the betterment of society, it would allow protections for Shan refugees. However, the Thai government continues to prohibit equity and freedom from developing. With the adoption of UNHCR guidelines, Shan refugees and migrants would have a better chance of being free from economic deprivation and having the ability to seek full rights to participate in the economies of Thailand and other nations.

The second analysis takes the side of the Thai government in arguing for maintaining the status quo in regards to the Shan. With this lens, it is possible to see that the Thai government is looking at the issue with a utilitarian perspective. For the government, it may seem that if more Thais are benefitting from the exploitable non-native underclass of Shan workers, then the current situation is ethical. From a neoliberal perspective, it could also be argued that placing the Shan in refugee camps would limit them from partaking in individual entrepreneurial freedoms, which of itself would be unjust. Kostin concludes by explaining his stance that Thailand's policies are self-serving and

restrictive of the Shan's rightful access to opportunities for refuge, education, and resettlement.

In the chapter that follows, "Identities on the Border: Education's Role in Shaping Shan Youth Identity in Chiang Mai," Jenna Watson explores how the education provided by a non-governmental organization (NGO) in northern Thailand has affected notions of identity among migrant Shan youth. Watson uses the notion of social identity to understand the ways young Shan migrants construct their identities as individuals and as members of a group in activities coordinated by a local NGO, demonstrating the complex interaction of education and identity formation.

The ways in which young Shan migrants are constructing notions of identity in the borderlands illustrate how educational programming can influence concepts of distinctiveness at both individual and collective levels. Watson argues that Shan youth are harnessing the symbolic act of engaging in education to draw lines of differentiation between their selves in the past and their current selves, as well as to reify their belief in education's ability to complement and enhance both the trajectories of their individual lives and those of their nation. The living conditions and ambiguous spaces of Shan migrants in the context of the borderland forces them to negotiate the tensions and conflicts of their existence in Thailand, especially for education and self-perception. Watson's work reflects upon the shifting and negotiated nature of Shan identity within the context of globalization, community mobilization, and the increasing internal heterogeneity of Shan ethnicity in this region.

Border capitalism and Muslim networks

Migrant workers not only utilize tactics for present-day economic purposes, but for their futures as well. For example, Duangkamon Doncha-um, in her chapter "Negotiating Class and Marginalization of Burmese Muslim Female Migrants in Thailand," details how women are able to collaborate with their employers in order to attain the

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necessary documents to reside in Thailand legally. Duangkamon also notes the recent increased emphasis on education, as many women are now saving money to either send their children to Thai or Islamic schools in Chang Klan or to put themselves through school. Lastly, many women use money for healthcare purposes as an investment in their futures. Overall, crossing the border signals a change in status for Burmese Muslim women. Rather than being expected to stay home, they are now in positions to earn money for themselves and for their families.

After surviving numerous hardships, discrimination, and violence at the hands of the Burmese government, Buddhist monks, and general members of Burmese society, many Muslim Rohingya have migrated to Thailand. Increasing numbers of Rohingya migrants have found their way to the border city of Mae Sot where their predecessors have managed to establish fruitful and sustaining networks in the region. Mae Sot has been a very diverse community for several decades due to its position as a trading zone for Chinese, British, French, Thai, and Muslim traders. Kunnawut Boonreak centers most of his discussion on the idea of capital, and how by looking at the Rohingya, the meaning of capital can be understood not only as economic, but as social and cultural as well.

Overall, in his chapter “Newly-Arriving Rohingya: Integrating into Cross-Border Trade Networks in the Thai-Burma Borderland,” Kunnawut relates examples of Rohingya migrants succeeding in being able to assimilate in various areas and in some cases find success. He also notes how media representations of the Rohingya have been limited to either violent Muslim extremists or as helpless victims lacking power and capabilities. This situation demonstrates how the redefinition of identity occurs not only by freeing oneself from others’ limiting interpretations, but also in being able to connect and create interactions with people from other groups. Therefore, it is through this social and cultural interaction that established Rohingya migrants have been able to establish connections for newly-arriving refugees as part of a broadening network.

Continuing the theme of exploration of Muslim communities on the border, Wahyu Kuncoro relates the history and various utilizations of a large and culturally significant mosque in Mae Sot. In his chapter “*Musjid Nurul Islam: Social Networking in a Religious Space*,” Kuncoro argues that for Muslims, particularly Burmese Muslims, their community mosque serves not only as a center for religious concerns, but also social, economic, and political life. The mosque serves as a site of Muslim community and network creation. The author’s historical research reveals how the Nurul Islam Mosque has played a significant role in the expansion of the Burmese Muslim community in Thailand. Yunnanese Muslim traders initially built the mosque as a temporary shelter; however, after the military regime took over in Burma in the early 1960s, an influx of Muslim migrants to Mae Sot led to the expansion of the mosque.

Currently, the mosque serves as a significant center for the broader Muslim community in the area. Apart from the opportunities it offers for religious worship, the mosque also serves as a site for marriages, male circumcision rites, and education. The mosque has also immersed itself within the Thai community, with an *imam* (religious leader) specifically dedicated to working to maintain a positive relationship with the local government. Furthermore, the schools coordinated by the mosque are Islamic schools that concentrate on teaching Thai for the many Burmese students; however, the schools are open for students of all ethnic backgrounds. Overall, the mosque has been able to encourage children to build stores of social capital by facilitating their learning of multiple languages and cultures from diverse members of the community.

Rhetoric of the border

“Labor of Love: Intimacy and Biopolitics in a Thai-Burmese Romance” by Chairat Polmuk depicts the shift in both cultural attitudes and Thailand’s immigration policies toward migrant workers as indicated by the new direction being forged in contemporary Thai cinema. Chairat suggests that following the release and positive reception of the movie

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Myanmar in Love in Bangkok, the film has contributed to the warming of perceptions of migrants from Myanmar who have commonly been portrayed and viewed as the dangerous and deceitful descendants of historical foes of Thailand. Chairat notes that this optimism has been supported in part due to the ASEAN Economic Community's (AEC) new models for legal and social recognition of workers.

Chairat describes these new policies as components of intimate biopolitics in which the government advocates management of the population through the creation of sentiments of friendship and familiar cooperation in order to promote senses of national identity as a response to the increasing labor flows in the region due to the formation of the AEC. This new policy has facilitated more efficient tracks for Burmese migrants to gain citizenship. Furthermore, 'AEC fever' has led to the drive for more cultural coherence in the region as Thai historians are pushing for historiographies of Thailand's neighbors to be less degrading and nationalistic. However, Chairat cautions that while migrant workers are being assimilated into society as a social imperative, this is also done in order to manage and control their lives more effectively.

Finally, as a lyrical coda to this collection of academic works, Brian Fitzgerald White contributes "Transition Story: The Mosquito Net Commander," a fictionalized story of borderlanders in both conflict areas and refugee camps. As the authors of other works included here draw from the fields of journalism, social work, human rights, and media analysis, as well as the diverse disciplines of migration, peace and conflict, education, and development, it is perhaps fitting that this book ends with a piece of creative fiction. As the book as a whole demonstrates, the situations of Burma and the Thai-Burma borderland are—and will continue to be—complex and convoluted. Developing innovative and tailored approaches to appropriately supporting and enhancing the trajectories of the most vulnerable, disenfranchised people living in this in-between space of Burma-in-transition requires both critical and imaginative thinking beyond the capacity of any one field of inquiry or specialization.

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