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Living with four polities

States and cross-border flows in the Myanmar-Thailand borderland

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Chapter 7

Dynamic Mobility: Shifting between Trader and Labor Migrant

About 15 years ago [1997], I left my hometown to cross the Thai border. There were five of us, one man and four women. One of the women had returned [to Shan State] from Thailand to visit her child in my village, so she acted as the group's leader because of her experience with the journey.

We walked all the way, up and down the hills, and slept for three nights in the forest lying on mats set out on the ground. We ate food we had prepared at home. After arriving in Homöng, we took a pick-up truck to the Thai border. At the border checkpoint, I had my photo taken, plus my fingerprints and name were recorded in a logbook. During this process, I said nothing to the Thai authorities—that was left to the woman leading the trip who answered on the group's behalf. In fact, I didn't understand much Thai at that time.¹



Figure 7.1: *Mho Saeng waiting at the border checkpoint before traveling back home.*

¹ Interview with Mho Saeng on September 17, 2012.

The narrative of Mho Saeng illustrates the border control procedures encountered by cross-border travelers during the 1990s. As described in Chapter 6, Shan labor migrants' mobility across the international border was supported by established long-distance and cross-border trade networks in which driver-traders were crucial intermediaries in facilitating the mobility of Shan individuals. These intermediaries on both sides of the border had to develop different types of relationships with political powers in Shan State and state authorities on the Thai side to navigate the passages of migrants across different political territories and borders. Such dynamic forms of mobility over the past several decades have consequently coalesced into collective migration patterns of Shan migrants in the present. The migrants are able to return home, re-migrate, and complete circular migrations using established routes and routinized patterns to support their migratory trajectories over long periods.

This chapter presents the perspectives and narratives of Shan migrants as “mobile individuals” (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) in order to show how human passage is modified, halted, or managed as the result of interactions and negotiations between labor migrants and cross-border traders as intermediaries, and between intermediaries and political elites on the Thai side. Aligned with the previous chapters, I investigate the strategies within the frameworks of gifting and commodity exchange as utilized by the actors to facilitate mobility and support the migration process. Money is used as the commodity of exchange at some check posts, which is indicative of the cross-border migration industry that has created routinized patterns and enabled a large number of people from Burma to illegally cross into Thailand during the past several decades (Farrelly, 2012; Balčaitė, 2015, chapter 6).

Furthermore, I examine Shan migration as a two-way flow—a flow that is repeated on a regular basis. Such patterns characterize internal-international migration on one hand, and circular patterns on the other, which possibly involve one single migrant's migration processes (King & Skeldon, 2010). A majority of Shan migrants cross the border more than once, while shifting their forms of mobility to suit their required migration patterns, desired outcomes, and their livelihoods. They often traverse the same routes, while at other times they travel different routes while relying on similar networks. The routinized pattern of migration of the Shan resonates with Steven Vertovec's (2007b, p. 5) argument that migrants who establish networks that facilitate their border-crossing more than once become less aware of the illegality of their cross-border movements (see also Balčaitė, 2015, chapter 5).

Traders as intermediaries facilitating cross-border mobility

The migration of individuals and groups from Shan State to the Thai border occurs successfully with the support of cross-border networks, as described in Chapter 6. In this section, I further investigate the relationships and transactions between traders and Shan passengers who seek livelihoods in Thailand. Cross-border traders use their vehicles to transport the Shan to the Thai border, facilitating their mobility across the international border, and further into Thailand.

Nang Saeng, a cross-border trader from Mōng Nai in her mid-30s, told me that there would be three to four people joining her next journey to the Thai border. These people had come back to Shan State to visit their parents in the villages around Mōng Nai, and now wanted to return to their jobs in Thailand. She saw these passengers as a crucial source of income, supplementing what she earned transporting products from Thailand to small shops in Mōng Nai.

Yes, I bring people to Thailand because they know I regularly travel to the Thai border to trade. I don't have to convince them to go. They want to go despite being informed that working there in Thailand is hard and not suitable for those who have finished school with good grades. In Thailand, they usually work as housemaids and cleaners. If they stay here in Myanmar for a long time, there will be fewer jobs for them to do. So they ask me to take them with me, because they see I'm a good person and can be trusted as a *phi* [Thai: older sister] or *pa* [Thai: auntie].²

Nang Saeng seemed to want to make clear that she did not have a hand in coercing any Shan person to go and work in Thailand. By contrast, she reported that potential migrants saw her as a fellow villager who could be trusted. This situation is not different from that of Mho Saeng (introduced at the beginning of this chapter). Mho Saeng decided to leave her hometown to find a job in Thailand by following a Shan woman who was already working there. She told me:

Those who had left for Thailand, when they came back to visit their families, I realized that they had become richer. So I told my parents that I intended to travel to Thailand. They covered my transportation and other costs by borrowing money from my aunt to pay for my trip—around 5,000 kyat or 850 baht at that time to give to the woman who led the trip.³

² Interview with Nang Saeng in Mōng Nai on October 15, 2012.

³ Interview with Mho Saeng at the Nam Phueng checkpoint on September 17, 2012.

Shan migrants who choose to work in Thailand do not consider participation in these kinds of networks as taking part in human trafficking. They are aware of the hardship they must endure in traveling to the Thai border. They prepare and save the money required to pay for their travel costs in advance of their actual departure. The amount of money required depends on their places of departure—usually their hometowns—and their destinations. For instance, the amount Mho Saeng paid almost twenty years ago was 850 baht, based on a three to four day trip from Mawk Mai to the Thai border, about 150 kilometers to the Nam Phueng checkpoint, along poorly constructed roads. This fare did not include the trip from the Thai border to her final destination of Chiang Mai. According to Cham Tong, a cross-border trader from Mawk Mai, the amount required to travel from Mawk Mai to Chiang Mai and Bangkok by truck during my fieldwork period was 4,500 and 10,000 baht, respectively.⁴ In another example, the cost of traveling from Panglong township—which is approximately 250 kilometers from the border, considerably farther than Mōng Nai and Mawk Mai townships—and then on to Chiang Mai and Bangkok was 350,000 kyat (about 12,000 baht) and 550,000 kyat (between 18,000 and 19,000 baht), respectively.⁵ This journey took two-to-three days due to the mountainous terrains and poor infrastructure. Additionally, these were the rates for those who had never been to Thailand, meaning they had not yet procured any of the required documents.

Thailand's policy related to migrants in the national labor market has been situationally modified by the state and as part of agreements made between the Burmese and Thai governments. In 2003, the Thai government began allowing labor migrants to work and reside in Thailand with a Burmese passport, according to a memorandum of understanding (MOU) developed with the Burmese government. However, as previously described, passports can only officially be used at international immigration channels to enter Thailand, not at informal checkpoints like Nam Phueng. Therefore, crossing the border at this checkpoint is illegal, but the Thai authorities allow it to continue without maintaining any official records. One reason may be associated with the fares passengers pay to driver-traders on both sides. Portions of these fares remain at checkpoints located both in areas under the control of the central Myanmar government and those controlled by Maha Ja family's, as well as at official posts in Thailand (see Fig. 5.1 and Table 5.1 in Chapter 5). Shan people who aim to become labor migrants do not interact directly with either Burmese officers or representatives of the Maha Ja family. Instead, traders or truck drivers take a primary role in negotiating the flows of goods and people at

⁴ Interview with Cham Tong in Mawk Mai on February 28, 2013.

⁵ I collected the data from a trader's wife in Panglong on March 2, 2013.

checkpoints in Shan State and other areas of Myanmar. The ways in which travel expenses are prepared in advance by Shan migrants and contacts with driver-traders are arranged prior to travel emphasize the routinized nature of migration from Myanmar to Thailand (Farrelly, 2012), which has become a migration industry (Koser, 2010; Balčaitė, 2015, chapter 6).

Interaction of intermediaries and officers of the Thai state

As Willem van Schendel and Erik de Maaker (2014) point out, although one of the main functions of a border is to interrupt flows of people, the degree of success that each border achieves with this endeavor is anything but uniform. The successful operations of a border control system depends on the border's geographical settings, the degree of flexibility practiced by the border authorities when enforcing regulations, and how laws are interpreted at the local level. Here, I describe the mobility flows of Shan people after they reach the border and continue to other places in Thailand.

A migrant's journey across the border in the 1990s, when Mho Saeng first traveled, did not follow the same route taken by Shan migrants during the 1970s and 80s. Mho Saeng walked to the border after the ethnic conflicts in the frontiers had somewhat subsided, and she traveled through the jungle, which allowed her to avoid posts manned by Burmese soldiers. This emphasizes that modes of travel and infrastructure affect, to the degree to which Shan migrants potentially encounter representatives of political elites, Shan mobility. In the 2000s and onwards, infrastructure was developed and roads were improved, making it possible for travelers to commute by truck from the Salween River's eastern bank to Homöng. There they tended to encounter and interact with Burmese state agents posted along the way to the Thai border.

In the present day, immediately upon reaching the Thai border, Shan migrants encounter state regulations enforced by soldiers (see the locations of the Thai authorities in Fig. 4.1, chapter 4). The military officers there collect personal information from people entering Thailand, and also take photos and fingerprints. Army officers allow nearly everyone to enter Thailand and to travel further into the country, even if they suspect that some of the Shan might be arriving illegally or without proper documentation. A soldier of the Thai army explained to me that it is not easy to stop people from crossing the border:

For sick people, genuinely sick, sometimes they come very late at night after the border checkpoint has closed. They shout loudly so the soldiers can hear them. We see it as necessary and let them in. However, there are cases that make us feel ambivalent. These are cases like pregnant women who lack proper documents. We allow them to stay in Thailand for three days, but they usually stay longer, up to four or five days.

Some cases too are very obvious. They claim that they are sick. I ask them, ‘What is your name?’, but they answer me immediately, ‘Stomachache—let me see the doctor for three days.’⁶ Sometimes, five or six people come together and all say they are ill, but none of them have proper documents. In this case, we usually don’t let them all go to the hospital at the same time. When we reject their requests, traders on the Thai side are not pleased since they lose their potential income. So I have to tell the them, ‘Could you take only two or three persons at a time? Five or six is too much for us to allow to pass the border.’ Some border-crossers who have obtained none of the documents appeal to me to let them go by saying, ‘I made an appointment with the trader and paid him to pick me up already.’ Then that trader immediately adds, ‘I beg you, please let these two people come with me.’⁷

Although soldiers based at this post rarely get involved in obvious forms of monetary bribery, I learned that friendly relationships had developed between soldiers and many traders such that they had reached a level of reciprocity. As stated in Chapter 6, foods or trivial gifts were accepted by officers on both sides of the border, leading to tangible benefits that were not considered overtly illicit. After people from Shan State cross the border at the military post, most of these individuals continue to travel on to destinations further inside Thailand, despite the fact that they encounter a number of other Thai authorities at later check posts.



Figure 7.2: *A Shan mother carrying her baby while reporting at the military check post on the Thai side.*

At the customs office (post no. 2 in Fig. 4.1), the majority of border-crossers who are Shan migrants are not made to stop and report themselves to authorities. However, the traders

⁶ This Thai soldier implies that such Shan people have learned how to convince the Thai officers that they are sick, and have memorized certain sentences in Thai to give as answers. As a result, their stock answers do not match the questions posed by the Thai authorities.

⁷ Interview with a Thai soldier who was based at the Nam Phueng Military Base from October 2011 to September 2012, on September 25, 2012.

who are operators of yellow pick-up trucks do have to stop to declare goods imported from Shan State, and they may also have to stop if one of their passengers is a trader from the Shan State side carrying products to declare. The next stop is the local immigration office (post no. 3 in Fig. 4.1). Here, people from Shan State are supposed to present a document requesting permission to enter the Thai kingdom, *nangsue phonpan* (see Figs. 4.2–4.5 in Chapter 4), first stamped by the military unit at the border checkpoint, along with their Burmese identification card or other valid documents. They next have their photo taken using a digital camera, then the immigration officers stamp the form with their approval for either a trade or medical treatment permit. Often, truck drivers on the Thai side are able to conduct all of the steps of this process for their passengers without the officers taking photos of the people entering Thailand. Most Shan migrant passengers remain seated in the trucks.

This same procedure transpires at post no. 4 (a collaborative unit of police and volunteer territorial protection office), where a wooden bollard is set-up to stop movement. Traders halt here and report their names and vehicle information to the officers, while their passengers wait in the trucks. It does not take long for the Thai officers to record the information of traders and their vehicles, as a list of 24 known traders' names and license plate numbers are written on a board attached to the post's wall. Officers and traders maintain close relationships and have learned each other's names. Most of the time the traders step out from their vehicles only to greet the officers; occasionally they just apply their brakes briefly before driving off in a hurry. Officers at this post recognize the traders on sight record their names in a logbook. On several occasions, especially in the late afternoon, they might not take this duty as seriously as they would earlier in the day. Most afternoons, the officers play *pétanque* in the vicinity of the post and simply allow both traders and migrants to pass without question. Their performance seems contradictory to the national policy of fighting human trafficking, as promulgated on a banner displayed on the building's wall (Fig. 7.3). As presented in an excerpt from an interview with an officer at this checkpoint in the introductory chapter, these officers consider the Shan crossing the border into Thailand as familiars who are most likely making a journey to visit their relatives who reside in Thailand.

The last checkpoint on the journey along minor road no. 1285 is the Provincial Investigative Police Office (post no. 5 in Fig. 4.1), at which neither traders nor passengers stop as they are supposed to be made to do. The truck drivers simply rely on their acquaintanceship with the local officers to smooth the interaction, as they have known each other for years or even decades. This familiarity between both sides has resulted in lax monitoring, indicative of the local state's performance of its border control functions.



Figure 7.3: A sign of a counter-human trafficking campaign, displayed at a check post of the Thai authorities.

Beyond the rituals of border-crossing described above, Shan migrants succeed in crossing the border by utilizing partnership of traders on both sides considered intermediaries between them and the Thai officials. Nang Saeng revealed to me that she maintains friendly relationships with the traders on the Thai side, as it is of critical importance for her trading operations. If any conflict was to occur between the Shan and Thai traders, the Thais could undermine the Shan's cross-border activities. Nang Saeng accepted the fact that her partner on the Thai side was powerful and has helpful connections with state officers, stating: "Once I brought 16 people to the border, and my partner managed to take them all across the border and on to Mae Hong Son and Chiang Mai without encountering any problems at all."⁸

Shan labor migrants who cross the border through this checkpoint comprise the largest group of border-crossers, whereas the number of those conducting cross-border trade and those seeking medical services is much lower. Those in the second and third groups are not recorded as border-crossers by Mae Hong Son's immigration office. Oraphan, a female yellow-truck driver, conceded this point, explaining:

Most of the border-crossers through this checkpoint are *rang-ngan tangdao* [Thai: alien workers] who already work in Thailand, as well as their relatives. Members of these groups comprise 80 percent of the total number of border-crossers. Another 10 percent consists of those conducting small-scale and petty trade. The last 10 percent are those living on the Thai side but crossing the border for small business.⁹

⁸ Interview with Nang Saeng in Mōng Nai on October 15, 2012.

⁹ Interview with Oraphan in Mae Hong Son town on September 16, 2012.

In line with the aim to legalize undocumented labor migrants from Myanmar to serve in the Thai private sectors, these Shan labor migrants are obliged to procure Burmese passports, as required by the MOU agreed upon by the Thai Ministry of Labor and the Government of Burma (Mon, 2010, pp. 36–38). As previously discussed, Burmese passport holders are not supposed to travel between the two countries through the Nam Phueng checkpoint; however, state and non-state actors cooperatively work to facilitate the passage of Shan migrants in this category. These actions are considered ‘illegal but licit,’ and they are built upon the flexible enforcement and interpretation of Thai laws.

When these licit forms of migration occur, bribery is often involved in the process. Nang Khin, a Shan trader, divulged the average amount she paid to the Thai authorities for the ability to bring people from Shan State into Thailand. She explained that in an ideal situation, the Shan labor migrants who live in Thailand and have both a valid Burmese passport and related legal documents are usually charged between 700 and 800 baht by traders on the Thai side to travel from the Thai border to Mae Hong Son town. If they wish to travel on to other parts of Thailand, they can make arrangements to do so on their own. Out of the total fee of 700–800 baht, the truck drivers will pay 100 baht to immigration post no. 3 and another 100 baht to the Provincial Investigative Police. Fifty baht is also paid to the post staffed by local police and territorial protection officers.¹⁰ Sai Woon, a Thai trader who owns a yellow truck, accepts the fact that many of the border-crossers he carries have come to Thailand illegally, and so he also accepts that he will occasionally face trouble:

The drivers on this route sometimes face problems because we bring *kebon tang dao* [Thai: alien people] into Thailand, but we generally benefit from this work. It is risky but simultaneously highly beneficial. I was once brought up on charges when someone reported my activities to the Thai authorities, and it is because of the risk involved that we charge the passengers quite a high amount.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the amounts required to travel on to larger cities like Chiang Mai and Bangkok are considered very high, if not prohibitive, for migrants entering Thailand for the first time. Nang Khin told me that there were five posts located at different sites on the route from Mae Hong Son to Chiang Mai. For these journeys, the traders use private trucks instead of their yellow trucks registered with the local transport office. This is in order to make their vehicles less likely be stopped at the police or army check posts on the way. Some of the driver-

¹⁰ Interview with Nang Khin in Nam Phueng village on April 14, 2014.

¹¹ Interview with Sai Woon in Nam Phueng village on December 5, 2012.

traders do not drive their passengers all the way to their final destinations themselves, but have partners who do part of the driving. However, while the trip may be problem-free for a private vehicle the first few times, as time passes, the Thai authorities are more likely to remember certain drivers and their vehicles. After that, the journeys might not run as smoothly as before. As a result, to ensure a complete journey, additional bribes must be given to the authorities. Handing over 200 baht in bribes at each of the five checkpoints means a total of 1,000 baht in bribes for the trip from Mae Hong Son to Chiang Mai.¹²

After crossing the border, cross-border traders assist Shan migrants by providing transportation to their destinations by employing monetary forms of bribery rather than gifting. This is in contrast to the situation on the Shan State side of the border, where traders are able to facilitate their smooth passages by gifting Burmese soldiers or police officers based along the mountainous landscapes with staple food items or consumer products that are difficult to access in rural areas. Given that Thai state officers have no difficulties in accessing basic necessities, traders on the Thai side perhaps consider monetary bribery the most appropriate technique.

In order to avoid encounters interactions with state agencies on the Thai border, another method of crossing the border is human smuggling. Nineteen-year-old Kham Jing was involved in one such case. She is from Nakong village and decided to cross the border to find work in Thailand after her parents became bankrupt following Burma's demonetization of its currency in the 1980s. She paid a trader on the Shan State side 380,000 kyat to be part of a group of 16 persons who wanted to seek better fortune in Thailand. She, the youngest member of the group, left her hometown on foot through the jungle, passing many different villages on the way:

As much as I can recall, I crossed several hills and mountains until I could hardly count how many there were. It took three days and three nights to reach Monna village at one o'clock in the morning. We slept only a few hours and woke up at 4 a.m. We had to get up to walk through the jungle again to cross into Thai territory with one person from the village who knew the route well escorting us. In the meantime, there was another person walking to the border checkpoint zones to recon whether any soldiers were patrolling around. We wanted to avoid both Burmese and Thai military units. The leader of the trip brought us to stop at a certain spot on the road. There we found a man with a pick-up truck who was going to drive us to Chiang Mai. That truck was fully closed at the back. We hardly knew what was going on outside while driving along the way, until finally the truck driver stopped the engine and said loudly, 'We've arrived Chiang Mai. If you have relatives or anyone whom you know here, call them to pick you up now!'¹³

¹² Interview with Nang Khin in Nam Phueng village on April 14, 2014.

¹³ Interview with Kham Jing in Bangkok on December 17, 2013.

Kham Jing's case illustrates a type of border-crossing that is absolutely illegal, as such activities are not permitted by any state authorities on either side of the border. Furthermore, it illustrates the inefficiency of the state in monitoring cross-border flows and its failure to secure the border helps sustain strong networks that facilitate Shan migrant flows to move further into the country. From the state's perspective, these practices might appear to be those of a human trafficking syndicate, as they are, not supported by any state agencies. However, in the majority of these cases, including Kham Jing's, the individuals are voluntarily leaving their hometowns and have prepared money in advance to pay the transporters upon crossing into Thailand.

Repeated routes and routinized patterns

Previous Shan migration studies conducted in Thailand (Ferguson, 2008; Jirattikorn, 2008; Yasuda, 2008; Cadchumsang, 2011) placed their focus on Shan mobility from the perspective of Shan State, particularly to the dimension of migrants' status as newly-arriving migrants in transnational settings.¹⁴ More recent studies on the mobility of different ethnic migrants from neighboring countries into Thailand (Lee, 2011; Rangkla, 2012; Rungmanee, 2015) have not touched upon migration flows in reverse, particularly on the aspect of detailed trajectories. In this section, I aim to fill the gap by studying reverse mobility flows leading to circular migration patterns that have yet had little attention paid to them (Vertovec, 2007). I will then describe the journeys carried out by Shan migrants who return to their hometowns in Shan State, seasonally and for short and long periods of time. My findings highlight the utilization of cross-border networks similar to those used by migrants when moving in the opposite direction.

For most Shan migrant communities in Thailand, the preferred time of the year to visit their hometowns in Shan State is between early March and early May. During this time, the week-long festival of *Songkran*, or Thai traditional New Year, coincides with the traditional Shan *Poi Sang Long* festival, which involves the Buddhist ordination of boys between seven and 12 years old, and takes place either in people's home villages or nearby. These events provide migrants with extra incentive to visit their homes and spend time with relatives and friends, as well as with villagers from other locations.

Having saved enough money to cover the transportation costs and to remit funds to their relatives back home, the Shan migrants begin by contacting traders on the Thai side who they already know, or those recommended by friends or fellow villagers through word-of-mouth.

¹⁴ There are also a number of studies on Shan migrant communities in Thailand that mainly focus on place-making and adaptive strategies in the dominant Thai society; i.e. Wandee, 2002; Thitiwut, 2005; Panprae, 2007; Omsin, 2008; and Suntree, 2008.

The majority of these migrants have already obtained Burmese passports or other forms of legal documentation issued by the Thai state, to ensure smooth journeys out of the provinces where they have been working. They usually plan to visit their hometowns along with their siblings or friends of the same origins who are also in Thailand, and in some cases they travel together with their entire family, which might include aging parents and little children traveling together. Before crossing the international border, they usually travel to Mae Hong Son town, where they are met at the bus terminal by the contacted driver-traders. If the timing works in their favor, they are taken to the border checkpoint the same day. If the traders expect more people to arrive within a few days, they may wait for these people to arrive and accommodate the earlier arrivals at their homes in Nam Phueng village. During the passengers' stay, the traders provide them food, of which the cost is already calculated as part of the transporting fees. In some cases, the traders wait for their Shan trade partners to reach the Thai border, depending on the logistical arrangements on both sides. For example, traders in Shan State might wait for more people to arrive who wished to be transported to the border, or for money from the shops where they intend to deliver Thai products upon their return.

Rituals on the return journey

The pattern of Shan migrants' travel in reverse—that is, from Thailand to Shan State—is not significantly different from the travel they undertake from Shan State to reach Thailand. They depend on the same networks and take similar routes. In addition, the traders on both sides employ the same strategies to maneuver the journey across the various political boundaries and nation-state borders. For example, they must stop at each check post described above. The traders need to bribe the Thai authorities on the return leg, but pay smaller amounts at each checkpoint because, from the Thai immigration police's point of view, human flows out of Thailand are less worthy of scrutiny than those coming in. Nonetheless, if the traders can minimize their costs in terms of bribes or otherwise, they will certainly do so. One strategy is transporting their passengers in as short a time as possible.

Kham Ong, a trader on the Thai side, relates:

Many times Shan migrants stay overnight at my place before taking the trip the next day. The next morning, I send them out very early, at least before the immigration officers arrive at their posts. I save a 100 baht this way since I do not have to pay this amount to the officers.¹⁵

¹⁵ Conversation with Kham Jing on February 13, 2013.

Before crossing the border to Shan State, all Shan migrants follow a procedure similar to the one they endured when entering Thailand: having their photos and fingerprints taken and their names and destinations recorded at the check post manned by Thai soldiers. Meanwhile, the traders carrying passengers calculate their shares of the fees paid by the Shan labor migrants. Approximately one-third of the fees are taken by the traders on the Thai side, with the rate charged depending on the destinations. For instance, during 2012 to 2013, traveling from Chiang Mai to Nakong village cost 3,500 baht, and 2,000–2,500 baht from Mae Hong Son town to Nakong village. Similarly, a portion of the fares is deducted by traders to pay fees at the different check posts in Shan State shown in Table 5.1 (see the column ‘flows from Thailand to Shan State’).

The most important item for Shan migrants to have upon reentering Myanmar is their Burmese identification card, a pink card with a black and white photo attached. Throughout the entire trip, this ID card is retained by the Shan driver-trader to show at nearly all check posts, especially the ones located in the Maha Ja family-controlled zone, as evidence of the number of passengers they are carrying on each truck. Those who do not possess ID cards are unable to travel without going to the office in Homöng and applying for a guaranteed document called a *toak khan za* signed by officials (see Chapter 3). This permit costs 200 baht, a fee that the migrants must be responsible for themselves.

On the reverse trip, another rule that has been set arbitrarily is that when the trucks reach the first checkpoint in Monna village in the Maha Ja family’s political territory, all passengers must alight from the vehicle to report at the post and have their fingerprints taken. Traders do not see this rule as part of immigration control, but instead as a way to informally levy taxes according to the number of passengers in each truck. The rate in 2013 was 225 baht per passenger. Not long after that, the Maha Ja family altered the regulation to create more incentives for traders: for every six passengers, the traders are only required to pay a fee to the SSS personnel equivalent to that of five passengers, while if they carry 15 persons, they paid at the rate for only 13. The personnel controlling this post issues a document to the traders to certify the number of passengers they are carrying and for declaring at other check posts so they can continue to receive a discounted rate on the fees charged. This has motivated many traders to take a risk by lying about the actual number of passengers they are transporting. Therefore, the check post located in this village has become much stricter in counting the number of passengers in each truck because the Maha Ja family discovered later that they had lost income. As a consequence, the check post controllers at this post began ordering those in the trucks to

disembark and have their thumbprints recorded in a log-book in order to record the exact number of passengers.¹⁶

The next few check posts en route are less strict. Traders have to hand over varying amounts of cash and other incentives as gifts to those controlling the posts. When passing through each of these posts, the Shan labor migrants do not interact with the Burmese authorities or the personnel of the Maha Ja family, although the Shan migrants have no need to be concerned about their legal status. Only the traders communicate or negotiate with the people manning the posts, providing information similar to that given during the journey from Shan State to Thailand, i.e., what products are being transported, the ultimate destination, and how many people are being carried.

During a trip I took in May 2014 as part of my fieldwork, Nang Woon, the wife of the truck driver whose vehicle I was riding in, stopped by a red and white wooden bar at the check post at the exit of the Ta-sop-teng pier. Nang Woon spoke with two men at the post and signaled that she had already paid the fees. However, these two men at the post attempted to ask for something. Besides money from cross-border traders, they hoped to receive other incentives upon giving a signaled request. However, on that day, Nang Woon did not give them any form of additional gifts, saying in Shan that she had paid everything already and summarily driving away. When we reached Jalong village, the vehicle stopped at the village entrance. A man was standing by, and Nang Woon informed him that the back of the truck was loaded with lychees. The truck passed through the village center where the police office was located, and three or four police officers approached the truck while Nang Woon divided some lychees in a small cardboard box and gifted it to the officers before leaving the village. I have described these incidents to illustrate that traders who transported goods and passengers strategized their negotiations differently in response to various political elites in Shan State.

There are also situations in which Shan migrants do not invest any amount in their travel. Kam Jing explained that in a normal situation, to get back home, she needed to save around 2,000 baht for the cost of travel from the border checkpoint to Nakong village. This could be a free trip on the occasion that she participates in a Shan Buddhist tradition. Once Shan people residing in Chiang Mai organized the event by transporting a Buddha image from Chiang Mai to a temple in Shan State. She participated in this event without having to burden much of

¹⁶ I obtained this data from interviews with Sai Aung in Nam Phueng village on November 29, 2012.

the travel cost. This type of the Shan merit-making trip provides people the opportunity to be part of the convoy and travel for free.¹⁷

As described, arbitrary rules can result from changing political situations. The year preceding the Myanmar general election of November 2015 was a period in which the Myanmar government encouraged Burmese migrants in Thailand to return home to procure ID cards to be eligible to vote. During the trip I took with Nang Woon, after we arrived in Nakong village, I disembarked in order to stay overnight with a Shan woman I came to know from a previous trip. It was around 8 p.m. when the truck dropped me at the her home. Soon after, a person came to inform me I needed to pay 2,000 kyat to the *phytusiit*. I wondered if such a cost could be incurred unnoticed, as I had paid nothing during my previous visit to this village. Nang Woon explained to me that, a few months earlier, there was an influx of migrants who had been working in Thailand traveling back home to procure ID cards, and the Maha Ja family saw this as a golden opportunity to claim fees. They suddenly announced this rule to specifically charge those coming back from Thailand during this period. News of this newly-imposed rule was being circulated transnationally among migrant communities in Thailand.

Upon their trip from Shan State, the intersection between human mobility and state regulations meets in the form of expected bribery and gifting to state officers within Thai territories. On the Shan State side, monetary exchanges for fees and permits to move further are practiced within the Maha Ja family's territory, while in the Burmese territory, monetary transactions and non-monetary incentives are conducted. Similar to how gifts facilitate the flow of humans across the border, foods can also be used as gifts to the Burmese police and army officers who are based far away from sources of food or ready-made products. I consider the interaction between cross-border flows of humans and commodities to be a vestige of the authoritarian regime, in addition to the underground and black market trade created from the policies enacted as part of General Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism. However, the posts set up to take advantage of traders (or from a different perspective, extract fees that traders are obliged to pay) illustrates a mechanism that facilitates Shan mobility which is supported by cross-border traders negotiating with political elites by bribery, exchange of commodities, and gifting.

Shifting forms of mobility strengthening circular migration

Shan migrants are able to shift their forms of mobility to fit subsequent migration needs. Although they encounter arbitrary rules set on the Shan State side and state regulations on the

¹⁷ Interview with Kham Jing in Bangkok on December 17, 2013.

Thai side, they maneuver their movements to better their livelihoods over time. In this section, I present the partial stories of three Shan migrants and describe the ways in which they make use of long-distance and cross-border trade networks as forms of capital or resources (de Haas, 2010) in moving across the border and migrating to Thailand. Looking at the migration process from an agency approach reveals sophisticated migratory trajectories, both internally and internationally within long-term and short-term timescales (Bakewell, 2010).

From long-distance trader, to labor migrant, to cross-border trader

During the period of ethnic insurgencies in the 1970s and 80s in the Shan State's frontiers, many Shan participated in long-distance trade. Border regulations on the Thai side were nearly non-existent, though Thai officials functioned informally under the frontier regime. Due to the loose immigration controls in place, Shan migrants changed their forms of migration from being short-term border-crossers to labor migrants in Thailand. Nang Khin was one such trader from Nakong village during this period.

When I was a *mae ga* [Shan: female trader] in the 1980s, there was no border checkpoint at the Thai border like today, only rangers patrolling. Until the 1990s, a group of three or four people and I crossed the border to work in Thailand. At this time, there was an immigration checkpoint on the Thai side. I told the Thai officers that I wanted to visit my relatives in Mae Hong Son. But not long after that, I went to work on a pig farm in Chonburi province [in eastern Thailand] and stayed there for a while before moving again to work in Bangkok. Around two or three years passed, and I decided to return to Mae Hong Son. I did not go back to Shan State, but instead bought a plot of land and farmed, planting chilies and raising pigs to earn income. Once I had enough money saved to buy a pick-up truck, my husband and I started driving a yellow-truck to transport passengers and goods, and we have continued like that until today.¹⁸

Nang Khin's migratory trajectories illustrate the border regime under which the control of the border was not fully established on the Thai side. Long-distance traders like Nang Khin could travel back-and-forth rather freely numerous times. After the Thai state established its border control with the bureaucracy of a modern nation-state in the 1990s, Shan traders still managed to cross the international border under the loose border controls that inherited some characteristics from the frontier regime. Subsequently, long-distance traders eventually migrated and transitioned into labor migrants in Thailand for years. These successful shifting forms of mobility supported Nang Khin to become a more mobile individual (Glick, Schiller, & Salazar,

¹⁸ Interviews with Nang Khin on December 2 and 5, 2012.

2013) and empowered her to make choices in her life with increased agency. In the end, she was able to decide what forms of mobility and migration patterns she wanted to pursue.

Becoming long-term migrants and re-migration

The migratory network that enabled Nang Khin to migrate to and from Thailand for over 30 years, under both the frontier and border regimes, is longstanding. Nang Saeng's similar trajectory further illustrates how this migratory network is strengthened over time. These developed into stronger cross-border networks that she used as capital to facilitate her in moving across the border 10 years following. In the mid-1990s, Nang Saeng crossed the border to Thailand when she was 19 years-old via cross-border networks that Shan migrants like Nang Khin in the previous period had developed both in the immediate border zones and in transnational communities in Thailand. Although Nang Saeng faced more difficulties in moving across international borders during the border regime, under which more systematic border control on the Thai side was built up, the well-established cross-border migrant networks helped her to successfully move across the border.

Nang Saeng's migratory life was the reverse of Nang Khin's, as she, by the time of the interview, was a cross-border trader in Thailand, transporting goods and passengers between her home town in Mōng Nai and the Thai border through the Nam Phueng checkpoint. Before she became a cross-border trader on the Shan State side, she had been a migrant worker for over 10 years. During those 10 years, she gave birth to a son when she was 21 years old, and this influenced her decision to return home for about two years. Afterwards, leaving her son with her mother, Nang Saeng crossed back over the border at the Nam Phueng checkpoint to work again in Thailand, using a similar route and network. During her re-migration period, she moved around Bangkok, working in different factories. To describe her changing mobility forms, she changed from a long-term labor migrant into a return migrant after giving birth to her son and staying at home, then switched back to being a long-term migrant, before finally becoming a short-term migrant as a cross-border trader who traveled to Thailand on a regular basis. Nang Saeng's life over two decades emphasizes the continuing strength of cross-border networks. Furthermore, it explicitly affirms the inconsistent regulations of border control on the Thai side, resulting in constant permeability of the border.

From return to circular migration

By about 15 years after Nang Saeng's first period of migration in the mid-1990s, the migrant networks forged through cross-border trade had been further reinforced by prior

networks developed from the previous decades, presumably from Nang Khin's and Nang Saeng's migration periods. These migratory trajectories clearly illustrate the life of circular migration of Cham Tong, who first crossed the border to work in Thailand at the age of 17. The past four years of 21-year-old Cham Tong's life reveal her to be a highly mobile migrant. She is originally from Mawk Mai and left secondary school after witnessing many people in her village leaving for Thailand. She thought it would be an exciting challenge to work there, so she decided to travel to Thailand via the Nam Phueng checkpoint. From Mae Hong Son, she continued on to Chiang Mai, where she stayed for only a week with her aunt who had already been working there for several years. She was then offered a job in Bangkok as a domestic worker, taking care of children:

It was not that easy. Within a month I changed workplaces three times. I could no longer stand the hardship, subsequently asking my mother to pick me up in Chiang Mai after I returned from Bangkok. I went back to Shan State and continued my schooling up to level 10, but failed the exam. I decided to go to Thailand the second time along the same route. This time I didn't go to Bangkok; I worked at a coffee shop in Chiang Mai. Again, I worked there for only three months and quit because it was a hard job with a low salary—only 3,500 baht per month, though I had two days off each week. I eventually returned to help my mother as a *mae ga* [Shan: female trader], a job I am still doing now.¹⁹

I consider the trajectories of these three female Shan migrants—Nang Khin, Nang Saeng, and Cham Tong— within a framework of migration processes spanning from the 1980s to the present. This is a 40-year period, extending from the transition from frontier regime to the border and mobility regimes. Their ability to shift forms of mobility has resulted in their choices to diversify migration patterns across different periods as part of a larger social transformation or social change, as suggested by scholars of migration studies (Vertovec, 1999; Castles, 2010; Portes, 2010). Additionally, these migrants' creation of social space has led to changing and redrawn boundaries in which return and circular migration is able to take place conveniently (Faist, 2010; 2013a). What support their ability to shift their forms of mobility and subsequently encourage their diversified migration patterns? I answer that it was the development and strengthening of migrant networks established by individual Shan migrants from village fellowships, kinship ties, and ethnicity-based relationships. Moreover, their successful negotiations with border elites on both sides of the border based on payment of informal taxes, reciprocity, and commodity exchange has facilitated, prolonged, and extended the transnational migration networks across the borderland of Shan State and Thailand.

¹⁹ Interview with Cham Tong in Mae Hong Son on January 26, 2013.

Over time, Shan migrants have achieved the ability to shift their forms of mobility using their strengthened networks to support their required migration patterns. They may, for example, change from being short-term to long-term migrants and vice versa, or from being long-term to circular migrants. The partial life stories of the Shan migrants discussed here show that Shan migration has changed from primarily being a *push* form, or forced pattern, into a voluntary one of mobile individuals (Glick, Schiller, & Salazar, 2013) developed as part of a larger social transformation (Castles, 2010; Vertovec, 1999) or social change (Portes, 2010). As Janet Salaff (2013) suggests, in the push-pull model of migration, migrants attempt to integrate into their receiving destinations while cutting linkages with their home countries due to forced-migration motives such as poverty or political turmoil. Instead, the increasing visibility of Shan migration is the result of the particularity of the transformation of social space in the Myanmar-Thailand borderland in general, and the changes and developments that have taken place there as influenced by social actors at the immediate border zones rather than those representing the two central governments. As Roger Rouse (2002) argues, the lives of migrants cannot be separated from two spatial places, or two geographic sites, which are unified to become a hyper-spatial 'social field' where articulation of the new pattern of migration is allowed to occur, alongside more opportunities and pathways for re-migration and circular migration. Shan migrants are able to make choices, empowering themselves within this borderscape (see Salaff, 2013), which illustrates the dynamic socio-economy and border regulation changes that have taken place in the area over the span of several decades. Their shifting forms of mobility across the international border resonates with what Faist (2010, p. 1674) argues: "[...] intensive and continuous cross-border flows of persons, ideas and goods do not necessarily result in a de-bordered world. Instead, boundaries and borders are constantly redrawn." Such phenomena are created by various symbolized forms of exchange and transaction, and different kinds of relationships, especially that of reciprocity in migration (Faist, 2013a).

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the diversifying forms of Shan mobility that subsequently support them to migrate successfully to Thailand, and to practice repeated routing and circular migration over time. Ethnographic data reveals how migrant flows intersect with political elites at different political boundaries. Nonetheless, Shan migrants are able to move across the border due to their utilization of strong cross-border networks among key social actors: intermediaries in the form of cross-border traders on the Shan State side transporting people from Shan State, and cross-border traders on the Thai side maneuvering the travel across the national border as

allowed by Thai state agencies. Despite facing state control, Shan migrants continue to move in both directions, and do so repetitively, thus strengthening the transnational linkages between those who work and live in Thailand, and those remaining in their hometowns in Shan State. These journeys represent physical connections, in addition to telecommunications and remittances sent within transnational communities (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002; Faist, 2013a; Salaff, 2013).

In the context of the situation surrounding the Nam Phueng checkpoint, I have presented the narratives of several Shan migrants to include their perspectives on cross-border mobility when making choices intended to better their livelihoods over the short and long terms. Some of the migrants have shifted their migration patterns from short-term (as cross-border traders) to longer-term (as labor migrants in Bangkok or other parts of Thailand). Some have achieved shifts in their forms of migration several times over an extended period, from being long-term migrants to returning home, then back to being long-term migrants. The case of the youngest female trader, Cham Tong, reveals her success in crossing the international border twice within a short period of time, before deciding to become a short-term migrant as a cross-border trader. The mobility of the Shan from Shan State to Thailand, and back to Shan State for regular visits, reflects the transformation of social space within shifting and redrawn boundaries, both physically and abstractly. Transnational communities on both sides have become stronger, increasing opportunities for Shan migrants to migrate, re-migrate, and perform circular migration patterns within both short and long-term timescales.