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Living with four polities

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

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CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have focused on two related issues: border control and cross-border mobility. The characteristics of the Myanmar-Thailand borderland—inconsistency, arbitrariness and precariousness—that struck me when I first stepped into the border checkpoint have remained the central puzzle for me to resolve in this dissertation. This work therefore narrates what I have experienced and investigated in the Myanmar-Thailand borderland in order to answer three main research questions: 1) To what extent have states and non-state actors shaped the mobility of people and commodities in the past five decades?; 2) How do border communities respond to border control and state-imposed rules and regulations under the successive regimes of border control?; and 3) Are these dynamics specific to this section of the Myanmar-Thailand borderland or are they of wider significance?

In this conclusion, I follow a similar pattern as that of the introduction. I will describe the contribution of this work and suggest discussions that could further our knowledge in four study areas: borderland studies, state transformation, cross-border flows, and mobility and migration studies.

Borderland studies

The investigation of the Myanmar-Thailand borderland in this research exemplifies the new direction of borderland studies, which is moving away from taking nation-state borders as their focus. Nonetheless, there is a degree of consensus amongst scholars that borderlands and borders cannot be sufficiently studied by neglecting the existence and proliferation of nation-states (van Schendel & de Maaker, 2014). Consequently, researchers in this field have devised concepts to understand dynamics of borderlands and borders elsewhere across time and space (Newman, 2003; Rumford, 2006; Konrad, 2015). The Myanmar-Thailand borderland is a case study applying this new approach.

I have argued throughout this research that this borderland reflects a high degree of complexity because here cross-border communities acknowledge informal political boundaries more than formal nation-state borders. Two-sided national spatiality segregated by national borders does not actually coincide with the imagined boundaries that people on the ground perceive and interact with. This contradicts the ideology of the ideal modern nation-state in which two nation-states should be recognized, and play an active role in managing border affairs. Due to the borderland's multifaceted nature, individuals are able to strategize to suit the needs of

their personal situations (van Schendel & de Maaker, 2014). This diminishes the importance of nation-state borders. The “spatial turn” in the social sciences allows us to see not only nation-state borders that are dominantly presented in maps (Rumford, 2006), but also other types of political and social boundaries. Nation-state borders are now increasingly contested, redrawn, and rescaled.

The Myanmar-Thailand borderland presents a paradox. On one hand, it is the meeting point of two internationally recognized states, but on the other, it is the stage on which the ever-changing power relations of four distinct polities are played out. Consequently, this endows the borderland with dynamism, and both state and non-state actors mutually and competitively shape this dynamic border zone. In this dissertation, I have demonstrated that political territorialization by four polities—the Burma Army, the Thai state, the Maha Ja family and the Shan State Army-South—has corroborated the creation of ‘strategic space’ (Menziés, 1992) that challenges state-centered readings of borderlands.

To answer the first question—to what extent state and non-state actors shape cross-border mobility—it is clear that state attempts to intensify border control and to manage flows of people and goods are ineffectual. The impact of cross-border networks based on a multitude of relationships created within and across political boundaries is felt beyond nation-state territorialization. More specifically, I have studied the Myanmar-Thailand borderland through the lens of ‘regimes of border control.’ The three successive regimes —frontier, border, and mobility— have shaped and influenced cross-border affairs over the past five decades. I hope this conceptual lens provides a new perspective for borderland scholars to avoid methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013).

State transformation

“The state is always in the making.”

I quote Lund (2016, pp. 1199–1200) in order to portray states at the border as fluid, transforming, inconsistent, and arbitrary. States are situational and contextual. However, as Lund (2016) argues, state transformation from one form to another over time does not render that state as weak or fragile. As I argue throughout this dissertation, in the Myanmar-Thailand borderland non-state actors also exercise public authority similar to a state, and therefore states and state-like actors are not necessarily antithetical. Past researchers have attempted to define the autonomous polities along Myanmar’s borders as “state within state”, “mini state,” or “statelet” (Kyu, 2016; Than, 2016). In this dissertation, I have shown by taking the perspective of

borderland communities, the differences between officially recognized states and other polities dissolve.

I have also illustrated that territory making at the border is dialectical: the more the state aims to consolidate its power through territorialization, the more it is challenged—both by state-like actors and by cross-border communities. Throughout this dissertation, a further aspect concerns the analysis of state officials' performance at a local level. I look at the state from this angle to challenge the perspective in which the state is seen as a 'structure' rather than as a process in flux. Thai state officials are perceived by the community as enforcing laws and regulations in accordance with changing circumstances.

Cross-border flows

This dissertation aims to expand the spatial scale of studies on how Shan traders and migrants cross both political boundaries and nation-state borders, including their overlap along the journey. This facet is explored in order to respond to the second question, on how border communities adjust and react to rules and state-border controls under different regimes. I have argued that they adopt different strategies to outwit states and non-state powers, while engaging in smuggling activities, manipulating regulations, and creating their own rules, as well as by diversifying the meanings of commodities in the process of trading and moving goods across national borders.

This dissertation aims to contribute to an essential broadening of the scope of cross-border connectivity. To this end, I diverge from scholars who have studied the mobility of people and commodities separately. I look at them in continual interaction. In commodity studies, scholars realize that goods are closely related to human activities and that they create a 'social life' in relation to individuals. Commodities become "actors" that have social and cultural lives of their own (Appadurai, 1986). However, few scholars actually highlight the complex interaction between people and commodities, in which meanings of both flows converge and interact in border-crossing movements. In this dissertation, I have highlighted the ways in which Shan mobility is closely associated with particular commodities. I argue that people and objects can either be mutually supportive or be a source of reciprocal hindrance while crossing political boundaries and nation-state borders. Diversifying the meanings of commodities is one of negotiating strategies of cross-border communities when confronted by state regulations with objectives to harden and enforce border control measures.

Mobility and migration studies

Border communities are not always submissive to border control. They proactively and reactively respond to structural forces with different strategies. The narratives of Shan cross-border traders and labor migrants reflect their practices of fluid mobility strengthened by their cross-border networks, resulting in successful migration to Thailand and with the ability to shift patterns of migration to improve their livelihoods. However, as van Hear (2010, p. 1533) argues, migration scholars continue to pay little attention to uncovering mechanisms that enable many to migrate but prevent others from doing the same within the wider scope of “social transformation” (Vertovec, 1999; Castles, 2010) or “social change” (Portes, 2010). This dissertation is an attempt to fill that gap by unraveling the mechanisms that support and sustain the Shan cross-border mobility and migration to Thailand within a period of five decades to reflect how social space has transformed with the rescaling and redrawing of boundaries. In this research, I have traced the life stories of several Shan migrants who have crossed the border and migrated to Thailand during different time periods. The findings corroborate that, notwithstanding the intensification of border control, the mobility of people and goods continue unabated.

Moreover, this dissertation provides insights into the complexity of migration processes in which single mobile individuals can be involved. Influenced by mobility scholars (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2010; Faist, 2010; 2013b; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), I have examined Shan mobility and migration beyond the lens of transnationalism that has dominated migration scholarship for decades. Their works present key themes such as migrants developing a sense of belonging in host societies, the relationship between diaspora and homeland, and identity construction to cope with new settings (Fortier, 2000; Mankekar, 2005; Ferguson, 2008; Jirattikorn, 2008; Möhring, 2008; Panyagaew, 2008). Instead, I argue that mobility and migration are intertwined in a dynamic and endless process responding to state formation and consequently rescaled spatiality in the borderland. Shan migrants in this research tend to continue to be on the move, over long periods of time, and thus they contribute significantly to social transformation in Shan State as well as in Thailand.

In summary, I have answered the three main research questions posed at the outset. First, I argue that both state and non-state actors in the Myanmar-Thailand borderland have shaped cross-border mobility under three different regimes of border control. It is important to realize that non-state actors form a complicated amalgam consisting of local rulers of borderland polities (such as the Maha Ja family and the SSA-S), merchants, households, labor migrants, truck drivers, porters, and many more. Different rules and regulations have been enforced to exact

benefits, either on condition of freedom of movement or their contestation with other powers. Still, the border remains highly permeable and the mobility of people and commodities continues vigorously. Second, border communities and individuals have been able to respond creatively to new rules and regulations, manipulating them with considerable ease to support their mobility and that of the commodities they carry with them.

Third, I argue that the Myanmar-Thailand borderland is a peculiar case representing the complexity resulting from a very specific history of state formation. The borderland accommodates multiple social actors in addition to state actors: state-like entities, powerful border elites, and active armed ethnic groups, as well as border communities. They are all involved in actively contesting control of the border. For this reason, my dissertation underlines the need for borderland studies to be wary of methodological nationalism and the tendency to conceptualize borderlands as simply being dominated by two nation-states. The Myanmar-Thailand borderland may be a rather extreme case of multiple political authorities coexisting and of border communities living with four polities over a long period of time. However, the wider significance of this case is that it should sensitize future researchers to be open to the possibility of such multiple political authorities operating in borderlands that, at first sight, may seem less complex.