



Book Review:

Samak Kosem, ed.

Border Twists and Burma Trajectories: Perceptions, Reforms and Adaptations

Chiang Mai: Center for ASEAN Studies, Chiang Mai University, 2016

Jerrold W. Huguet

Consultant on Population and Development, Bangkok, Thailand

Email: jwhuguet@yahoo.com

Border Twists is an absolute cornucopia of people and societies living, working and moving along the 2,400-km border between Myanmar and Thailand, featuring Shan, Karen, Muslims, traders, refugees, migrant workers and aid workers.

In the first chapter, Phil Thornton observes that since 2012 Myanmar's reforms have gone into reverse; land confiscation continues unabated, several conflicts with ethnic groups have flared up, and political activists and journalists have been arrested or killed. Hannah El-Silimy also notes that regions where ceasefires have been signed have seen increases in the establishment of new military bases and harmful large development projects. She argues that civil society should play a key role in rebuilding peace at the societal and community levels.

Maaik Matelski addresses issues of foreign aid and donor dependency in Myanmar, although only from the perspective of relatively small civil society organizations and not from that of intergovernmental organizations, country donors or international non-governmental organizations.

Three chapters consider the situation of Shan migrants in Thailand. Busarin Lertchavalitsakul observes that earlier Shan migrants were fleeing conflict or were essentially forced to move because of the dire economic

state of the Myanmar economy but that more-recent migrants are more likely to move of their own will owing to the job opportunities available in Thailand. Garret Kostin points out that, whereas Karen, Karenni and Mon persons fleeing conflict in Myanmar have been allowed to reside in “temporary shelters” and to apply for resettlement in third countries, those processes have generally not been permitted for Shan by the Thai Government although a sizeable proportion of Shan migrants merit recognition and protection as refugees. Jenna Watson describes the considerable impact that education of Shan youth in Chiang Mai can have on ethno-development.

Three chapters are also devoted to the smaller populations of Muslims along the border. Duangkamon Doncha-um analyzes the case of Burmese Muslim female migrants in one section of Chiang Mai city. All of her case studies are women who have been domestic workers. Although her subjects are thus marginalized on several planes, she exhibits considerable restraint in using the term “intersectionality” only once. Kunawut Boonreak studies newly-arriving Rohingya in Mae Sot, a group overlooked by the mass media in their focus on the smuggling of Rohingya via the Andaman Sea to Thailand and Malaysia. Those in Mae Sot are mostly undocumented because of their inability to obtain identity documents from the Myanmar Government, and thus work permits in Thailand. Nonetheless, they are able to take advantage of a network of established Rohingya and other Muslims in Mae Sot to find employment. The author argues, however, that this is not a sustainable solution and that the Thai Government should develop clear and practical policies regarding migrant workers that would limit the opportunities for some people to exploit displaced persons.

Wahyu Kuncoro documents the ways in which Masjid Nurul Islam, the first and largest mosque in Mae Sot, functions not only as a religious center but also assists and accommodates Muslims in the town. It operates a school with nine grades that follows the Thai curriculum, a kindergarten, and *hafiz* and *madrassa* religious schools. The mosque also has built housing on its property so that it can rent rooms at a low cost to poorer persons, many of whom are new migrants.

All of the chapters described above are based on social research and emphasize the importance of networks and social and cultural capital in the adaptation of migrants to Thailand. The networks are based on combinations of family, community, employers, ethnicity and religion. Social and cultural capital are derived from access to these networks, often because of language, ethnicity and religion. Vulnerable migrants use these networks and their own agency to find employment and gradually to build better lives for themselves.

This determinedly optimistic view of migrant adaptation taken by all of the authors may gloss over (perhaps subconsciously) the real obstacles, discrimination and exploitation faced by migrants to Thailand. The methodology of ethnographic research can contribute to this obstructed view. The chapter on Muslim female migrants to Chiang Mai, for example, considers women who have been in Thailand for several years, hold work permits and have access to government hospitals. The chapter on education of Shan youth is based on those who are studying English and hope to go on to higher levels of formal education.

The chapters taken together demonstrate that migrants from Myanmar to Thailand comprise forced migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and both documented and undocumented migrant workers, and that individual migrants often change among these categories during their sojourn. In addition, children of migrants may not necessarily be migrants themselves but are treated as such by Thai authorities. Several of the chapters would have benefitted, however, by greater clarity in describing the administrative status of the individuals chosen as examples. As Thailand permits persons from neighboring countries to enter with daily or weekly passes at border checkpoints, migrants' entry is normally not irregular nor are they smuggled although their status may change if they violate the terms of the border pass. The chapter on Muslim female migrants refers to some of them as holding a "migrant card". Is that a work permit? Who issues such a card?

There are two intriguing chapters that are not based on social research. One, by Chairat Polmuk, reviews the changing depiction of Burmese in Thai movies in a political and economic framework while the

other is fiction in the form of a short story. Polmuk observes that up to about five years ago, Thai movies that considered Burma were nationalistic and glorified Thai men and women (often Royal) warriors. A recent movie, however, featured a migrant worker who becomes an intimate friend of a Thai woman. This might seem to be a positive trend but Polmuk declares, “By paying attention to intimacy as both an emergent trope of representation and as a new vocabulary for the governing rationality, I foreground the intersection between an affective economy of intimacy and the biopolitical control of migrant populations ...” (p. 312). The elevated academic discourse is somewhat difficult for this prosaic reviewer to digest but Polmuk clarifies in his final sentence, “It is only by working through affective layers of this intimate public, I argue, that we can fully grasp its damaging results on minoritized subjects” (p. 313).

The final chapter in the book demonstrates a degree of bravery on the part of the editor as it is a short story by Brian Fitzgerald White, who begins by informing the reader that it is not about Karen people, their civil war, the Tatmadaw, or Thailand. Actually, the chapter is less a short story than a bleak description of a sinister and nihilistic world of heat, rain, mud, jungle, fear, suspicion, civil war, malaria, food shortages, lack of healthcare and education, child soldiers, children retarded by malnutrition, war photographers hoping to make their reputation, women who bear the children of their rapists, and paedophile aid workers. As such, the fiction might tell us more about some border states than a shelf of academic papers.

Border Twists and Burma Trajectories provides a detailed review of a fascinating borderland peopled by migrants who are refugees, students, traders, domestic workers, and manual laborers, many of whom have fled inhumane conditions in their homeland and all of whom are striving to adapt to and prosper in a country that is at best ambivalent about their presence and at worst distrusts and fears them. It is a valuable book for anyone interested in modern-day Myanmar, Thailand and the migration between them. The volume has been well-edited by Samak Kosem and Garrett Kostin.