

Research Report

Research Project

Perceptions of Borders and Human Migration:
The Human (In)Security of Shan Migrant
Workers in Thailand

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Research Framework and Overview of Case Studies

1. Purpose of the Research

This research aims to understand the differences in the *perception of borders* between the Thai government, Shan migrant workers, Thai employers, and informal brokers which perpetuate the flow of illegal migration.

2. Significance of the Research

Due to the increasing number of illegal Shan migrant workers who are living, producing and consuming products and services in Thailand, or in other words, being absorbed into and continuing to contribute to the Thai economy, it is necessary to map a framework of *borders*, *human migration* and *human security* for policy makers to approach and use in addressing the migration issue as a basis for future theoretical development. A focus on the different *perceptions of borders* in the migration phenomenon may point the way toward a more comprehensive view of the international migration process, particularly for ASEAN to have more realistic border and migration policies.

3. Research Questions

Based on the purpose of the research, my research questions ask as following:

1. What kinds of insecurities do the migrant workers expect to resolve through migration?
2. What are the *perceptions of borders* of each actor involved with the phenomenon of migration of Shan migrant workers?
3. What are the costs and benefits
First, of Thai government and Thai employers, on border crossing of Shan migrant workers?
Second, of Shan migrant workers, in measuring their *well-being* and *advantage* between living in Thailand and in Myanmar?

And what are the results?

4. Hypothesis

Again based on the purpose of the research, my hypothesis is “The flow of illegal migrant workers is continuing and increasing due to the differences in the perceptions and functions of *borders* between the Thai government, Shan migrant workers, Thai employers, and informal brokers”.

5. Research sites and Research Informants

Fieldwork C: August-September 2008

Fieldwork sites	Samplings: Focus Groups and Key Informants	Numbers of Informants
Chiang Mai, Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Local Thai policemen at Mae Suai police station ❖ Village head of Wieng Wai Village, Fang District ❖ Local Shan people at Mai Moak Jam Village, Tha Ton Town, Mae Ai District ❖ Shan Monk at Moak Jam Shan temple, Tha Ton Town, Mae Ai District 	<p>4</p> <p>1</p> <p>4</p> <p>1</p>
Chiang Rai, Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Local Shan villagers at Bann Rom Po Thong, Tha Ko Town, Mae Suai District ❖ Shan monk at Pieang Laung Shan Temple, Pieang Laung District ❖ Shan displaced children at A Camp (the name of the camp is treated as confidential in this research) ❖ Thai workers at Golden Triangle, Chiang Kong District ❖ Thai immigration officer, Chiang Kong-Huay Sai immigration office, Chiang Kong District 	<p>2</p> <p>1</p> <p>8</p> <p>2</p> <p>1</p>

5. Research Data from Fieldwork A, B and C

Research Data*

Shan migrant workers (Representative sample: 47)

Human Insecurity in Myanmar		Human Insecurity in Thailand	
Life threatened at gunshot	35	Verbally and physically threatened by Thai employers	17
Forced relocation	25	Money deducted for accommodation, food and broker fee	19
Forced provisions to military	40	Travel to Thailand through informal brokers	38
Unpaid labors to military	29	Re sold by informal brokers	12
Language prohibition by military	22	Delays in wage payment	17
		Bribery to local policemen	26
		Arrested by Thai policemen	18
		Language barrier	22
		Use public services (healthcare, education)	15

* Based on research fieldwork in Thailand and Myanmar from 2007-2008

Research Data*

Shan migrant workers (Representative sample: 47)

Human Security in Myanmar		Human Security in Thailand	
Own an agricultural farm	4	Contact NGOs when violated by Thai employers	7
Participate in cultural Shan festivals	12	Safely get jobs through relatives/ friends	9
		Get comparatively higher wages in Thailand	36
		Feel culturally and socially close to Thai society	25

* Based on research fieldwork in Thailand and Myanmar from 2007-2008

6. Research Findings and Conclusion

1. An age of commodity-defined needs creates economic dependencies on wage work which drive people with the low access to capital to move to other economic spaces with higher access to capital. In the capital-oriented economy in the age of nation-state, human mobility depends upon the availability of "transportation", and no longer on feet and open frontiers (Illich, 1981). After the colonial period, the movement of humans and goods across the nation-state borderlines need to be done within the state's legal framework with requisite documentation. "Whether "legal" or "illegal", "official" or "unofficial", the would-be crosser must enter into dialogue with the agents of the state and engage in practices ultimately determined by the state: either directly through compliance with and acceptance of state regulation, or indirectly, through avoidance, dissimulation and concealment." (Donan and Wilson, 1999)
2. "Invisible" borders before the emergence of the nation state, were made "visible" and "measurable" after the state was found and the nation was created. Modern state borders serve as a guard to their human and natural resources. Borders are politically and socio-economically strategic and symbolic to the state. Throughout the research, particularly in Chapter One, the notion of borders was discussed and illustrated by a historical and contemporary account of Thai state relation's with Shan State of Myanmar. Borders transform the socio-economic structure of people living along the borders, while governmental immigration policies have been developed separately from the lives of border people.
3. Since borders are used to mark the differences between "us" and "them", borders can be both bridges and barriers for more opportunities in another political and socio-economic space. Whether and how Shan migrants' border crossing will create opportunities or close them off to various actors involved in migration will be concluded in the border perceptions approach as follows.
4. This research aimed to illustrate borders in three definitions and functions by three different entities. Firstly, to the Thai government, borders are politically defined, delimited, and demarcated. They are simultaneously employed as a means of separating and joining the Thai state with others. Given this border feature, borders are employed to maintain state control over the movement of people, goods and information by those who are in positions of power in state centers and may never even visited border areas but whose decisions affect border people' lives . Immigration policies which are formulated based on this

top-down perception of borders thus create some loopholes and are ineffective to control the *illegal* flows of Shan migrant workers from Shan State to Thailand.

5. Secondly, to border people or Shan migrant workers, borders are not perceived as the political frontiers or territorial zones which are standardized to be a *periphery* in the geographical landscape, people, and culture. Borders, on the other hand, imply the meaning or are symbolic of the *center* for job opportunities and of socio-cultural varieties. On the micro level, borders are constructed and function through a cultural perspective which transcends political borders. The social interactions give them the actual meanings to borders since border people cannot infer or deduce knowledge of the political and economic borderline defined by the state. Borders to local people, however, function within two overlapping meanings of borders; first meanings is the very *existence* of the borders defined by the state which creates border socio-economic activities to the locals, and second meanings is *social borders* which are mainly discussed in Chapter Three.
6. Thirdly, in regard to Thai employers and informal brokers, they seem to be a group of persons who are hidden within the discussions of modern nation-state borders and gain benefits from it quietly. They obtain the meanings of borders from both previously mentioned entities- the Thai government and Shan migrant workers, and apply them separately or/ and mutually depending on the situations. On one hand, by using the macro meanings of borders, Thai employers and informal brokers make use of the non-stringency and inconsistency of immigration law and policies to take advantage of potential migrant workers both in the process of migrating and working. On the other hand, they realize and exercise the local meanings of borders to create and maintain their informal broker business at borders in accordance with the Thai employers' demand for cheap Shan migrant workers.
7. According to the above perceptions of borders, I would like to conclude that borders function like a *sponge* whose features are flexible and absorbent. In the same way, modern *borders* can take some people in through and/ or exclude those people out of its territorial space. Its features and functions vary depending on whether and how it will differently facilitate the perception of the holders.
8. The analysis of borders perceptions drives me to question whether and how illegal migration would be possible to control given the condition that the Thai state should try to balance the migrant workers' fruitful economic contributions and their numbers. The Thai government has faced the dilemma that borders

must remain business-friendly and “open” to cheap labor. However, it failed to control an oversupply of low-skilled migrant workers from the last decade. The recent contemporary immigration controls by the Thai government attempt to curb migration flows of low-skill workers¹ from three countries, namely Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia, rather than support and recognize the opportunities they offer. The lack of collaboration and correspondence within the borders, between the Thai government, Shan migrant workers, Thai employers and informal brokers leads to the inconsistent immigration policies, as was obvious in the migrant registration process from 1992-2005.² The *parasitic symbiosis* instead of *mutualistic symbiosis* approach taken by the Thai government toward Shan migrant workers creates a gap between policy makers’ ambition and the actual situations. The *parasitic symbiosis* approach employed in the migration policy formulation (for policies implementation in post migration) is the perspective that the Thai government loses their national benefits, while only Shan migrant workers are able to take advantage from migration phenomenon. This is opposite to the actual relation between the Thai government and Shan migrant workers which both actors earn benefits from the other’s existence or *mutualistic symbiosis relation*. However, this is needed to consider separately from the immigration policy formulation (for policies implementation in pre migration) which is influenced by the governmental realization of Shan migrant workers’ contribution to the Thai economy. The policies incoherence may create anti-immigration feelings among the public and migrant workers because of the belief that the government is unable or unwilling to solve the problem.

9. The contemporary trends in migration control happen with two kinds of controls, external and internal. For external controls, receiving countries are more concerned about border security and attempt to encourage sending and transit countries to perform a more strict surveillance against irregular migration. This is found to be unsuccessful due to the lack of local perspectives in immigration and security policy formulations of both sending and receiving governments. When external controls fail, the receiving government tries hard to establish internal controls over the undocumented migrants after their entry.

¹ Pecoud, Antoine and Guchteneire, Paul de, **Migration without Borders: Eassay on the Free Movement of People**, the United nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and Berghahn Books, Paris, New York, 2007, p.2.

² Please refer to Table 1 and 2, page 18 to 20 in Chapter One.

Controls on workplaces are normally ineffective since it displeases Thai employers and that means the potential consequence of economic and political costs. Moreover, informal relations and networks among local authority, Thai employers and informal brokers are important factors determining how successful the immigration policies from the central government would be. Therefore, "another option is to control undocumented migrants' access to social services. Immigration status is increasingly used to restrict access to welfare provisions, but this policy meets resistance: it is questionable from a human rights perspective, as it generates even greater exclusion for migrants and contradicts the inclusive nature of the welfare system" (Cohen et al., 2002).