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between Thailand and Its Neighbors series 2

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Introduction

This study is concerned with how forces of human flows and capital advancement affect the social system of Mae Sot, a Thai border town in Tak province neighboring Burma.[1] Mae Sot is situated in a flat valley which is formed by two mountain ranges – the Thanon Thongchai mountain range and the Dawna mountain range. The former extends up from Chiangmai Province and ends at Kanchanabri Province, dividing Tak Province into two halves. The latter runs along the border between Thailand and Burma up from the north of Karen State down to Tenasserim Division. The rugged mountains of these ranges have always restricted communications between Mae Sot and the areas beyond the ranges. This feature, in turn, has attributed to Mae Sot's uniqueness in various sectors such as population formation, culture, economy, and so on. Also, it was conducive to Mae Sot's central position in the western Tak Province which also has the same geographical restrictions. Up from Tha Song Yang down to Umphang, for people in this region, Mae Sot is like a capital, where they pursue their livelihoods and education. Even when they go to Bangkok and the inner places, there is a need to stopover in Mae Sot before continuing their journey because a big and convenient road over the mountain range is only connected to them via Mae Sot. The advancement of the Burmese migrants from

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1 I will refer to the country as "Burma" instead of "Myanmar." Since the current military junta changed the name of the country from "the Union of Burma" to "the Union of Myanmar" in 18 June 1989, the choice of the name among individuals and various groups has become a political act (those engaging in democracy movements have been persistent in using "Burma"). Scholars often use both names interchangeably. The reason behind my choice in using Burma does not necessarily reflect a political stance. The main reason of doing so is to appreciate the historical use of the name and to maintain consistency in naming the country throughout my study.

Mae Sot to Bangkok which this study deals utilizes this route.

Against the backdrop of these geographical conditions, Mae Sot historically has played a linking role for traders travelling between the Indian Ocean and mainland Southeast Asia. It also paved a way for military operations for the pre-modern kingdoms of Burma and Thailand. It was a buffer area between these two archrivals throughout history. In this regard, Mae Sot and its adjacent areas as "in-between" places accommodated various kinds of people such as traders, fugitives and ethnic traitors even before the modern period.

Up until several decades ago Mae Sot remained just a small village. When the Burmese military took power and subsequently introduced the Burmese Way of Socialism with her doors closed to the outside world from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, Mae Sot was a prominent entry point for the black markets along the Thailand-Burma borderland which was controlled by ethnic rebels, notably the Karen National Union (KNU). The prolific operation of the black markets drew enormous attention from Thai locals as well as the ethnic Burmese who were seeking to eke out a livelihood. Specifically, the black markets gave rise to big local businessmen who originated from other areas, particularly Bangkok. During the days of the operation of the black markets, in tandem with existing ethnic mixtures, Mae Sot saw the trend of domestic migration from other areas of Thailand to Mae Sot for border trade.

However, conditions changed dramatically in the latter part of the 1980s. The Burmese economy fell into awful conditions, achieving the status of a "Least Developed Country (LDC),"[2] while Thailand went through an enormous economic boom during the 1980s. A newly shaped Burmese military junta came to power and opened her long secluded doors to outside countries. However, it kept a tight leash on domestic affairs and harshly trampled the democratic uprising and furthermore penetrated into the liberated areas held by ethnic rebels. In a series of assaults by the military regime, the black markets were rendered redundant, and the trading trends between both countries mostly proceeded in an official and formal manner.

It was at this time that a multitude of Burmese migrants came to Mae Sot in search of their livelihood, as the economic gap between Burma and Thailand widened during this period. The series of subsequent tides of migration brought about a demographic expansion in Mae Sot. It is estimated that the number of the Burmese reached over 200,000, whereas that of the Thais is around 100,000, though the population of the

[2] The status of "Least Developed Country" has some requirements: the per capita income should be below US$200; industry should be less than 10 per cent of GNP; and literacy is also less than 20 per cent. Burma was said to have adjusted its state of literacy downwards to qualify for that status (Myat Thein 2004: 84).

Burmese has not been counted exactly.[3]

Apart from economic migrants, refugees and political activists also flooded into the town and its outlying vicinities in search of refuge. As of June 2009, 65,707 refugees among 134,401 refugees in total along the Thailand-Burma border are housed in three camps in the vicinity of Mae Sot (TBBC 2009: 17).

Demographic expansion caused by the influx of alien people changed the economic and social conditions of the town. In the industrial sector, many factories from other provinces relocated to the town to take advantage of cheap foreign labor. Around two hundred factories, mostly producing garments, are in operation with over 30,000 Burmese laborers employed. Other economic sectors saw a great deal of economic participation and contribution from them too. It is extremely common to find Burmese being employed in almost every shop in the town. The preponderant presence of the Burmese is also observable in the realm of domestic work.

When it comes to the social system of Mae Sot, what is most conspicuous is the fast turn-around of people. The continuous ebb and flow of people distinguishes the town from elsewhere. The border social system is not static but dynamic. The society always reflects changing conditions brought about by the movement of people.

To a great degree, the flow of people is generated by the geographical character of the Thailand-Burma borderland where porosity and permeability are common. Thus many people do move back and forth across the border without much difficulty, except in zones where there is on-going fighting and in militarized sections. However, this is not the single cause for the flow of people. Insufferable conditions and battles in some places have forced people to move to Thailand. In addition, Mae Sot's status as a border town offering economic opportunities has attracted many migrants.

Mae Sot is not only engaged in population circulation with connections with Burma but also has further connections with other places beyond the borderland such as Bangkok and even third countries. Once the Burmese reach the town, they soon find other compelling opportunities elsewhere beyond the town. On the one hand, the town is like a small cosmos for many of people rooting their lives in close connection with the place; while on the other hand, people utilize the town as a springboard to further movement.

During my stay[4] in Mae Sot, Burmese migrants attempts to advance to Bangkok for

[3] The information on the Thais in Mae Sot was obtained from the Mae Sot District Office whereas the number of the Burmese in Mae Sot is estimated from various interviews with people, including civil servants and Burmese political activists.

[4] I conducted full-scale fieldwork from July 2004 to July 2005 with several periods of follow-up fieldwork

better opportunities was a hot issue and refugees were excited in being resettled in third (mostly Western) countries. I often heard from factory owners that they lost their Burmese employees because they had headed for Bangkok. Also, I clearly recognized that resettlement programs rampantly affected refugees in refugee camps and urban areas. This made a great impact on both the town overall and the lives of normal migrants and refugees. The town was encountered with the massive force of this outflow of people even though it sees new people come over to town from the Burmese side. Though the ebb and flow of people is the natural characteristic of the border social system, it does not always take place without tension and impact on society.

Another force that is challenging the current state of the town is the immense flow of capital which is being brought in by massive economic projects, notably the Special Economic Zone sponsored by the Thai government and various international bodies. These projects have been changing the landscape of the town through the development of infrastructure and attracting global investment. Accordingly, in a move to exploit the town as a base for broader regional and global economic prosperity, this modern capitalistic development is increasingly exposing the town to outside actors. The town is facing these exogenous modern economic forces at the moment while on the other hand it still sees people live their lives according to an intimate connection with the border.

This study deals with these challenges that the social system of the town is facing at the moment. Mae Sot is a stepping stone not only for the Burmese to move from Burma to Bangkok but also for Thai and international investors to move in the other direction. Both population drainage to other places and the multitude of economic projects have a great impact on the current society of the town. Though flows of population and external influences have been inherent characteristics of the town throughout its history, the current stage of events draws our special attention since they take place in the context of the global phase of population movement and capitalistic development.

Fluidity and a border social system

Traditional anthropological notions that tended to consider places as discrete, separate and self-reliant have been criticized by a group of scholars (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson et al. 1997). Conventional anthropological research assumes that the modes of people's lives were formed and maintained in particular places on their own.

thereafter. The most recent visit was paid in February 2010.

Relationships with and influences from outside were hardly included at all in the traditional literature. These approaches tended to spatially incarcerate natives to a particular place (Appadurai 1996), taking for granted the isomorphism of peoples, places, and culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 34).

Scholars that interrogate the relevance of this traditional approach suggest that we now need to look at the mobile features of people's modes of life in the era of globalization. Therefore, in new approaches, "migrants" and "refugees" are considered as adequate subjects in order to show the very nature of their mobility. Also, scholars pay special attention to borderlands, suggesting that "the notion of borderlands is a more adequate conceptualization of the 'normal' locale of the postmodern subject, rather than dismissing them as insignificant, as marginal zones, thin slivers of land between stable places" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 48).

However, in the modern state system, borderlands inevitably fall under the influence of the state. Though it is acknowledged the engagement of the state in appropriating the borderland in order to firmly mark the symbol of its sovereignty and further its economic advancement to neighboring countries, it is problematic to locate the state into the central point without adequate credentials to the periphery in analyses of relations between the center and periphery. The state-centric approaches presuppose a center-periphery dichotomy and are preoccupied with the dominance of the center over periphery. In the state-centric approaches, peripheries are predestined to be incorporated into the centers of political, economic, and cultural areas. Modernization theories (e.g. Rostow 1960; Inkeles 1969), dependency theories (e.g. Frank 1969) and world systems theories (e.g. Wallerstein 1979) are based on this assumption. Not only found in discussions of modern societies, but also in analyses of pre-colonial social formation in Southeast Asia, this center-periphery model has been prominent (Walker 1999: 6). Phrases such as "mandala" (Wolters 1999) and "galatic polity" (Tambiah 1976) presuppose the asymmetrical power relationships and radiance effects of influence from the center. Though these state/center-centric approaches are informative in understanding the nature of the centers' power and aspects of their influence in peripheries, they oversimplify power relations, whereby power inevitably flows from the center, as if by the force of gravity, power flows from the "top" down (Walker 1999: 8). In addition, they show a lack of interest in the impact of the periphery on the center (Migdal 1988: xv).

Unlike assumption by the center-oriented framework, this study argues that borderlands play an active role as a "node" in interconnecting national boundaries (Hannerz 1996: 17). Hannerz (1996: 67) notes that "the interconnectedness typically takes the shape of a relatively continuous spectrum of interacting meanings and meaningful forms, along

which the various contributing historical sources of the culture are differentially visible and active." In this interconnectedness, borderlands are not considered to be dominated by the center as conventional center-periphery approaches argue. Rather, these are the places where "interplay" and "mixtures" or "creolization" between the center and periphery take place. Absolute distinctions between "we" and the distant "they" are blurred and "transnational" characteristics can be observed (Kearney 1991: 55). This theoretical discussion sheds light on the understanding of the linking role played by Mae Sot. As a border town and entry point, well located in between Thailand and Burma, Mae Sot plays an interconnecting role and Burmese migrants hop on this chain in advancing their movement from Burma to Mae Sot to Bangkok and elsewhere.

The notions of node and interconnectedness epitomize key features of border social systems: fluidity, vibrancy and movements. The constant ebb and flow of actors is a conspicuous but normal phenomenon in borderlands. Border social systems show that vibrant changes are an intrinsic part of the border society. Alvarez (1984: 121) states that a social system or society is built upon organized, fluid movements of people through time and space. He (1984: 121) goes on to mention that these fluid people are the lifeblood of societies and migration and mobility (flow) are an organized part of these social systems. According to him (1984: 122), "the flow of people through a continuing migration (legal, undocumented, temporary, permanent, circular, and so on) is built into the fabric of border society." Fluidity does not necessarily destabilize the social system in the borderlands. Rather, fluidity is an inherent part in the constitution of the border society. When we look back on the history of Mae Sot, it is evident that flows of various people such as merchants, fugitives, refugees, and so on engendered the society. Though people advanced further to pursue better opportunities, another group of people would soon fill in the gap that was left and build their settlement. It demonstrates that fluidity and migration are deeply associated with the continuation of society.

Interconnectedness and fluidity do not only favor the movements of people. In the era of globalization, capital also tends to take advantage of interconnectedness and fluidity, the very nature of border society. Especially given that regional integration has been becoming one of the major issues in mainland Southeast Asia, the scrutiny of economic opportunities in the borderlands is initiated by individual states with the assistance from international organizations such as the Asian Development Bank (Asian Development Bank 2001; 2004; Tsuneishi 2005). It is quite noticeable at this stage that the flow of capital and various economic development projects sponsored by states and international organizations in an attempt to advance to neighboring countries have been rampantly taking place. The Thailand-Burma borderland represents exactly this phenomenon of the encroaching movement of capital.

We can recognize that two forces – human flows and capital advancement – are simultaneously affecting Mae Sot and consequently making the social system more dynamic. This study touches on how these two forces have had an impact on the society of Mae Sot. On top of the historical traits of fluid movements, current movements of people and capital will provide for a much more holistic understanding of the constitution of this border society.

Human flows

This section deals with human flows, particularly focusing on the outflow of people from Mae Sot. The town has been encountering a massive outflow of people from Mae Sot to other places. There are two big factors in this ebb of people: the first is the Bangkok Dream and the second is resettlement programs. These are the main causes of population movement to other places, making the social system very fluid and dynamic. However, despite the drainage of population, the town never becomes void because it also sees another inflow of people from Burma. Indeed, these two occurrences speed up the circulation of the ebb and flow of people, which remarkably distinguishes the town from other places.

The Bangkok Dream

> *"Mae Sot is like a kindergarten for the Burmese where they go through the period of adapting to Thai society by learning the basic language and culture of Thailand before leaving for 'big places' after a while" (A Thai rose farm owner).*

Nukphan was running a garment factory with 420 mostly Burmese workers, on her payroll. She began to operate the factory in the year 2000 after taking over its ownership. She took on production orders from Bangkok in the form of subcontracting from global brands such as Nautica. As recently as July 2005, she revealed to me that around 110 workers had left her factory in that year alone; most of them had gone to Bangkok. This meant that she lost over twenty-five per cent of her entire work force. Her case was not

exceptional. Suanpha, who ran another garment factory, producing clothes for the Reebok brand, also disclosed to me that around ten per cent of her 120 workers had departed her factory. Most of them had also headed to Bangkok. These kinds of episodes were observed across almost all factories in Mae Sot around that time. The Bangkok Dream of the Burmese migrants was tremendously devastating to the industrial sector of Mae Sot.

Farms and shops in Mae Sot also witnessed the flight of their employees to Bangkok. Paradon running a rose farm near Phop Phra District mentioned that quite a number of his workers had quit the job on his farm in order to move on to Bangkok. According to him, "Mae Sot is like a kindergarten for the Burmese where they go through the period of adapting to Thai society by learning the basic language and culture of Thailand before leaving for 'big places' after a while."

When I revisited Mae Sot in December 2005 after five months of absence, I was bewildered by the fact that I could only recognize a few of the ten workers in a restaurant that I used to visit. Most of them that I had known had already left the restaurant. Neither did I see a teashop boy that I used to chat to in a teashop. When I went around the town at that time, I saw in many shops that new employees replaced those whom I had known in the past. Despite the absence of the exact information of the whereabouts of these previous employees, it can be easily assumed that they might have gone to Bangkok with little possibility of them going back to Burma and working in other shops in Mae Sot. Though I had also sensed the frequent altering of employees in many of the shops during my year-round stay, my five-month absence gave me a clearer picture of the fast-changing flow of people.

It was partly due to the labor transferring policy where the Tak Governor made an agreement with other provinces in need of cheap labors to transfer Burmese workers in Tak Province to those provinces-in-need in 2004. To take up one example, a fishing net factory in Khon Kaen Province had been granted a quota to hire 1,800 alien workers after the manager of the factory had requested the hiring of alien workers from Tak Province. The factory's request had been approved and the transfer took place after 15 November 2004 (Bangkok Post 18 November 2004). In implementing this policy, it was believed that some policemen and officials mobilized innocent Burmese workers, who held proper permits, to meet the requests of other provinces. It was also believed that some of these policemen extorted brokerage bribes from the Burmese migrants and even gangs were involved in this movement of workers (Bangkok Post 13 September 2005). This policy propelled ordinary Burmese workers, whether they were holding a Work Permit or not, to seek better opportunities in other places, beyond the border.

Factory owners' complaints against this policy grew and in the end erupted in the form of

a demonstration to annul it on 29 August 2005 at the District Office. Finally, the policy ceased to implement that policy following on from the demonstration incident. However, according to an official in the Mae Sot Labor Office, even though the policy became defunct due to the objections, the illegal or unauthorized movement of Burmese laborers to Bangkok still continued, initiated by the Burmese themselves in connections with brokers.

The effect of this policy was never negligible, enhancing the trend of leaving the border area for inner places, notably Bangkok over the years. As Paradon mentioned, they spend some time in Mae Sot, gathering information on the opportunities of livelihoods in Bangkok after crossing the border, before embarking on another journey.

Above all, the higher job opportunities and the relatively higher level of wages encouraged the movement of the Burmese to Bangkok. In Mae Sot factories, an individual Burmese labor earns around 130 baht a day. But in Bangkok, he or she gets about 170 baht a day. For ordinary Burmese labors, this wage gap is a compelling reason for them to move on from Mae Sot. Especially jobless Burmese and temporary workers in work places such as small-scale construction sites are very keen on seeking a job in Bangkok as an alternative survival strategy in an effort to get over their precarious living conditions.

Not just from the stance of material gain but from the cultural stance, a more modernized metropolitan environment plays a certain role in attracting them to Bangkok. The stories and news that comes in from their friends and relatives in Bangkok to Mae Sot often includes a flashy description of the lifestyles of the global city. People circulate this news in their factories and teashops, contributing to building the image of the Bangkok Dream.

Not only Mae Sot but also Mae La Camp in its vicinity experienced a similar phenomenon. One of my informants told me that it was not exaggerating to say that roughly each family had at least one family member working in Bangkok. According to his assumption, overall ten per cent of the whole residents of the Camp were working in Bangkok whereas a similar number of people working in nearby areas. The condition that the job opportunities of the Camp are extremely limited propels refugees to make a movement to Bangkok.

The pathways to Bangkok are full of obstacles. In this regard they have to pass through several checkpoints guarded by soldiers and policemen on the road between Mae Sot and Tak. Some individuals attempt to climb the rugged mountain rather than to travel by car so as to evade those checkpoints. Once they get to Tak, it is relatively easy for them to take a car and head for Bangkok in the absence of checkpoints. Some of them even kept

on walking to Bangkok. A group of the Burmese from Chin State told me that they walked from Mae Sot to Bangkok for several days. In the case of Mae La Camp refugees, they climb a nearby mountain, continuing to walk through mountain pathways to Omkoi which is over 100 km away from the Camp, and then advance in the direction of Chiangmai to meet a main road. From there they get in a car traveling towards Bangkok. For the refugees, this route is more secure and convenient than to choose the Mae Sot-Tak passage.

However, these methods of evading the checkups were very rare options. Most of them were connected to brokers to whom they paid around 6,000 baht for the purpose of bringing them to Bangkok without being caught at the checkpoints.[5] If they do not have this amount of the money, they could borrow money from brokers and the debt is paid off in the form of a deduction from their monthly wages. As mentioned earlier, some officials and gangsters were involved in this affair. Some people were deceived by brokers in transferring to Bangkok. According to one of my informants, he was told that he would be brought to Bangkok by them. However, the place where he ended up was Pattani in southern Thailand. For some time, he had to work in fishing sectors and his monthly wages were taken by them. He was checked and arrested by the police there and was brought back to Mae Sot to be deported to Burma. But he was released before deportation.[6]

There are consequences of individual people's movements to Bangkok at the family level as well as at the level of economy. Family members became scattered. Due to parents working in Bangkok, remaining children in Mae Sot lack proper care. Though some migrant schools run dormitories for those children, it is a tough job to give enough care to them due to the lack of manpower and funding. Also elderly Burmese do not have proper care from their sons and daughters working in Bangkok though remittance solves financial difficulties to some degree. In the case of factories, farms and shops, it discourages owners to conform to legality. Since the departure of their employees means the loss of their money in assisting them to apply for Work Permits at the initial stage, they are very reluctant to have their new employees apply for Work Permits again for fear that they too would leave soon. It partly explains why the state's legal enforcement fails in the town.

Notwithstanding this outflow of people from Mae Sot, Mae Sot's social system including

[5] According to my informants, the brokerage fee has been increased to 10,000 baht since November 2006. However, if they use a pick-up service after crossing over the mountain, the fee will be reduced to 8,000 baht.

[6] For general information on human trafficking in Thailand, see the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2005).

the economic sector is not dismantled. This is due to the continuing inflow of people from Burma in the hope of pursuing better opportunities. For the Burmese inside Burma, Mae Sot is like an extended territory of Burma: as they can reach the town with relative ease. Hence, the social system of the town soon recovers equilibrium in the maintenance of population. The equilibrium in the border town is not meant to be static, but reflects dynamic features of human flows.

Resettlement programs

Throughout my stay in the borderland, resettlement programs were hot issues among urban political refugees who were called "the Persons of Concern (POCs)"[7] as well as among ordinary refugees in refugee camps in its vicinity. It was, of course, a big issue for innocent Burmese migrants in the town since they usually stayed in migrant resident compounds together with political refugees and they also heard about resettlement programs.

At first when the programs were noticeably implemented in the early part of 2004, those POCs staying outside the refugee camps were only eligible for the programs and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was in charge of moving them to other countries, mostly Western countries such as the USA, Canada, Norway, Sweden, and Australia. Stepping into the middle of 2005, the programs which the UNHCR was in charge of were in the process of being expanded to the refugees in the camps in cooperation between the UNHCR and the governments of those countries. Even before this expansion, there were individual cases of refugees' resettlement into other countries under the responsible sponsorships of individuals and organizations in the resettled countries and in recognition or approval of the resettlement by the concerned governments. But since 2005 the governments of those countries themselves have been massively bringing refugees into their countries. In 2005, the Thai government gave approval for third countries to offer the resettlement program to registered refugees in all camps along the border (TBBC 2008:4)

Through resettlement programs, 4,913 Burmese refugees left for Thailand for

[7] Since the Thai government is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and 1967 Protocol, asylum seekers in Thailand are technically regarded as "illegal immigrants" under the national law. However, the government often referred to the Burmese refugees as "displaced persons" (*phu opphayop*) (Lang 2002: 92-93). In particular, those who fled into Thailand for political reasons and stay in the urban areas are referred to as "the Persons of Concern."

resettlement in 2006. The figure surged up to 14,636 in 2007 and 17,172 in 2008. In the half of 2009, another 9,667 refugees departed from the borderland. From the outset up to 30 June 2009, all together, 46,388 refugees have been resettled in third countries (TBBC 2009: 9). Given the commitments of the UNHCR to the programs in the strong cooperation with individual governments of the countries such as the USA and Australia more Burmese refugees are expected to be transferred to these countries in the future.

Seeing people depart from the borderland through the programs, seemingly innocent people were intrigued and wished to take up the opportunities. Indeed, the UNHCR Mae Sot Field Office had to handle a massive number of frequent visits from ordinary people to ask about the programs. Whenever I passed the Office, I often saw people asking about application forms at the gate of the Office. It was an everyday scene during my stay. Nonetheless many of those who inquired misunderstood that the application was about resettlement programs; indeed the application was about the entitlement of the POC. After screening the application form and an interview, one can be entitled to the POC. Then another round of interview processes for actual resettlement is conducted by the embassies of the concerned countries. Those who succeed in passing the embassy interviews proceed through medical checkups. After that, cultural orientations where they learn about life styles of their destinations take place. Then they board on an airplane from Mae Sot airport to their third countries with transit in Bangkok.[8] Though the Office kept informing new applicants of these processes, the misunderstanding continued.

At any rate, the status of the POC is favorable in taking the opportunities since the POCs received special attention from countries concerned with advocating the introduction of democracy into Burma and also from the Thai government which was attempting to remove them from Thai soil for security reasons through resettlement programs. During my stay, the Thai government took the action of moving all of them out of urban areas to refugee camps by 31 March 2005, notably to Noh Poe Camp in Umphang District where they had to stay until they left for third countries. The reason for this action was to prevent political activists from engaging political activities in urban areas (Bangkok Post 1 April 2005; Irrawaddy 30 March 2005). Urban refugees kept transferring to the camps in 2006 too (Irrawaddy 18 September 2006). Since all of the POCs are meant to be resettled in the future eventually, POC Status, apart from signifying persecution, became a sort of a "passport" whereby they can advance to third countries.

At first, the UNHCR Mae Sot Field Office used the standard form of application but later the Office allowed the applicants to describe their personal biography. Here personal

[8] The Mae Sot airport is intermittently closed when it cannot afford to operate due to the shortage of passengers. In this case, they are transferred to Bangkok by land.

biography was regarded as most important in the process of screening. It was said that many of applicants, if not all, manipulated the biography, putting a special emphasis on some parts of their life story, for example, political persecutions from the Burmese authorities, while omitting other parts of their life history. An official of the Office in charge of the screening and interview job mentioned that he can tell the genuineness of these stories by using some of the know-how he accumulated over the years. It is said that a priority in the selection process was given to those who have a record of service as soldiers of the opposition groups. One of my informants who used to be a Karen soldier passed the screening process by proving his record as a soldier with his photos in the uniform of the Karen military. He nonetheless omitted some parts of his life that could have raised doubts among the interviewers. At the first stage, one of the conditions was that the applicants must not be camp refugees. The interviewee however, had lived in a refugee camp during his pursuit of a relatively higher level of education though he was not registered as a refugee in the camp. Another applicant that I knew of stressed his relatedness to relatives who were involved in KNU activities though he himself did not have any evidence of political suffering. A middle-aged woman highlighted that she was not promoted to a higher position in the government organizations of Burma because of her relatives' involvement in political activities though it appeared that her mature age naturally pushed her to retire.

Here we can see the politics of personal biography at play. In this sense people emphasize some points of their life history whereas they omit certain others. I do not intend to judge the morality of this. Rather what we see from these cases is that personal biographies are not neutral but selective and even political especially for those vulnerable people, being appropriated as a means for resettlement programs. Indeed the suffering and hardships that one had encountered, had now become resources in the application. This would come to be referred to as "the resourcification of hardships and adversities."

Among people in general, the Karen in Mae Sot, especially young Karen engaging in religious and community activities stood out in approaching the UNHCR. As I often observed whenever youngsters got together at the church, the hot topic of their dialogues was about the application and the interview process. Successful applicants passed on know-how about how to fill in the application form and how to prepare for the interview with the screeners from the UNHCR or embassies by sharing their experiences in going through the processes.

In the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot which was established by Doctor Cynthia who has been awarded with many human rights prizes for devotion to the treatment of Burmese migrants, the medics and trainees shared their information on the programs while they

were working in the Clinic. I often heard that the work ethic of the medics was becoming insincere due to the anticipation of taking the chances of the programs. A report of the Irrawaddy on 7 September 2006 delivered the complaint of an official in the Clinic that some 40 medics were leaving the clinic to seek resettlement.

This trend was also strikingly observed among Burmese political groups. It was reported that 600 Burmese exiles with UN documents left the so-called "Liberated Area" in 2004 (Irrawaddy February 2005). In the case of the National League for Democracy (NLD), as many as 100 members have left the border for third countries during the period between 2003 and June 2005 with 250 members remaining in Mae Sot and its vicinity border areas as of June 2005. Additionally many of the remaining members of the NLD were applying for resettlement programs whereas some people were ready for leaving sooner or later. Given that membership of the NLD was regarded as a convincing guarantee for selection, innocent Burmese began to apply for membership in an attempt to have an advantage in being entitled to the POC and application for resettlement programs. However, the NLD introduced a screening process based on the records of previous activities and collective consents from senior members in accepting new members. In the case of the Mae Sot-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), 21 of the 100 members of the organization resettled in 2004 in the USA and Norway with the rest having applied for UN refugee status and likely to follow (Irrawaddy February 2005). The All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) also saw about 60 members opting for resettlement from 2005 to 2006 although it kept the rule of forbidding members to apply for UN refugee status to maintain the group's strength (Irrawaddy 7 September 2006).

Reasons for applying for resettlement programs reflect their adversities in their everyday lives. Most political activists had to endure extremely harsh living conditions in the borderland in the hope of bringing democracy into Burma. However the political situation of the country never improved and they were losing hope that political change would occur. Furthermore, unstable conditions that they had to tackle in their everyday lives caused by the lack of financial stability and proper legal status mounted further hardships upon them. These prolonged adversities propelled them to make a decision to apply for the programs in the end. In the face of expanded opportunities for getting out of the hardships and beginning a new life in developed countries, it was extremely difficult for them to resist such an opportunity.

Refugees were also fed up with staying in confined refugee camps for a protracted period, even though the places had become like their new hometown where they had re-established social and family relationships. In the absence of foreseeable solutions to

this deadlock situation, the news of massive resettlement opportunities came like a welcome rain after a long period of drought.

As they had come to get used to their hardships and having experienced long-existing difficulties in restricted conditions, the notion of "freedom" had become a kind of nostalgia that existed only in their imagination but not in reality. They anticipated that resettlement in fully free developed countries would restore the full-fledging freedom to them.

My investigation reveals that there are other reasons. Many of the young applicants mentioned "education" as a decisive factor. They had not acquired a proper education in the appalling education system of Burma. They are therefore very restricted in the pursuit of opportunities in higher education within the Thai educational system. They expect that resettlement would allow them to pursue higher and more diverse education opportunities under the sponsorships of the concerned governments. For many of the parents, the potential for the education of their children drove them to approach the programs too. I often heard from the parents that they themselves could stay in the borderland but they wanted their children to have a better education without restrictions in third countries.

Usually the aged were not as fascinated with the programs as the young since they were afraid of having to adapt to totally new environments which includes their lack of ability in the language of the destination country. Nonetheless many of the older generation just followed their sons and daughters to other countries rather than pursue the alternative of living a lonely life in the borderland. Some of them, especially the educated old-aged people, even took the programs as a way of spending their latter part of lives in comfort with a government pension.

Economic opportunity provides another one of the reasons. A refugee complained about free conscription of labor in a construction site of a camp, saying, "If I go to a foreign country, even toilet cleaning work would bring me seven dollars per hour." As this case shows, despite appearing to be confined, refugees know about the outside world and if possible they attempt to seek further opportunities for their livelihood beyond the refugee camps. Not only innocent refugees, but many applicants in general expected economic prosperity in their future lives in resettled countries. Some people were determined to say that they would financially support their organizations in the border by sending some amount of their money earned in those countries.

Resettlement programs have a great impact at the level of organizations and communities. At the individual level, they might be regarded as a blessing that opens up numerous opportunities though they of course would face imminent challenges in adapting to the

host societies. Yet at the level of organizations and communities, the programs were considered a disaster: as it caused brain drainage. As shown in the cases of political movements and groups, a great number of members were lost and constantly encountered the pain of expulsion. The ABSDF strength in border areas has shrunk to a trivial number of members from a force which one day numbered in the tens of thousands (Irrawaddy February 2005). The education system in the refugee camps was also being shattered because of the departures of qualified teachers to other countries. At the meetings of the Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) in June and July 2005 which I attended, many of NGOs revealed that their refugee employees had left their organizations and it was difficult to find suitable teachers to make up for the empty positions. The Mae Tao Clinic was also losing skilled medics. The Karen church witnessed faithful members go abroad. Many other Karen organizations such as the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) and the Karen Youth Organization (KYO) also experienced the drainage of human resources.

The General Secretary of the KWO sarcastically lamented in a talk with me, "Now we are returning to the Stone Age in the absence of educated people. What we are going to learn in the future is only how to make fire using stones."

Indeed it is obvious that this is lessening the capacity of the KNU. An NGO worker remarked that: "For the KNU, the real threat does not come from the Burmese government but from the UNHCR and Western countries." It was becoming difficult for the KNU to find committed young people, compared to how it was in the past. Additionally, soldiers were deserting their battlefields in the face of the immediate opportunities for a better life. Even the soldiers of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) which broke away from the Christian-dominated Karen in 1994 knew about the resettlement programs and attempted to take advantage of the available chances. During a visit of mine to the Umphang District border areas a DKBA soldier in charge of Burmese areas near Umphang District revealed his excitement in this regard to my informant who was a former classmate of his.

One of high officials in KNU revealed to me his concern about the negative impact of the resettlement programs, stating that "It is a real danger for the KNU given that educated people depart from the organization" though he countered this by saying that "Not all people are leaving and those resettled would make some contributions in the future."

People are divided with regard to the programs. The aching question to those supportive of it is how to carry on the missions of the nation or political changes without the presence of human resources; the aching question to those opposing it is what alternatives individuals would have in the prolonged hardships. Here we see two notions –

individualism and communalism – in play in the two conflicting stances. However, it seems evident that the force of individualism has gained victory over the other as a massive exodus of population continues. Political leaders are not clear about this issue because at the group level they have duties to maintain the capacity of human resources whereas on the other hand they have their sons and daughters for whom they want to give better educational opportunities in developed countries.

Resettlement programs enormously generated population movement: on the one hand it drives people from the border to third countries but at the same time on the other hand it induces a great deal number of people to Mae Sot and its refugee camps. As mentioned earlier, many people voluntarily crossed the border and came over to Mae Sot from the Burmese sides such as Rangoon in a move to approach the UNHCR with the hope of taking advantage of resettlement opportunities. After submitting application forms, they continued to stay in the town and engaged some activities for their livelihood or took part in group activities while they were waiting for interview appointments and screening results. Even if their cases were rejected, many of them did not want to go back. One of reasons, I often heard, was that Burmese authorities would interrogate them on the case of their approach to the UN agency.

Population inducement to refugee camps is also striking. The UNHCR began to carry out the registration project in October 2004 in cooperation with the MOI. The original MOI/UNHCR registration and a headcount was carried out in 1999 and although initially new arrivals were added to the registration, there was no official registration of new arrivals after the end of 2001 when the Provincial Admissions Board (PAB) which determines the status of new asylum seekers in the camps ceased to function (TBBC 2005: 2; 2004:2; 2003: 2). The project started from camps in the southern part and extended northward to the camps in Tak Province in 2005. Coincidently, resettlement programs were expanded during this period. Hearing the news about the registration, people attempted to get into the camps to register their names as camp residents in the hope of putting their names on the lists of resettled people. But the main objective of the registration project was to re-register the original camp population for the purpose of exact calculation. Regarding the matter of registering new people, although the UNHCR and the MOI register their names, the PAB was supposed to decide the entitlement of camp residents afterwards. In other words, their status as asylum seekers and, hence, their resettlement chances were not confirmed. Whether they knew about the processes or not, it did not stop their strong determination to get into the camps by whatever means. Interestingly enough, innocent Thai Karen were also worked up by the resettlement programs and they endeavored to get into the camps by using ethnic connections with Burmese Karen refugees.

The registration project brought back to the camps those refugees who had been pursuing their livelihoods elsewhere in places such as Bangkok. During the period, when I came back from Bangkok to Mae Sot by bus, I noticed a lot more passengers than at other times, many of whom were estimated to be returnee refugees, on board from Bangkok. On the way to Mae Sot, they were caught and assembled at the checkpoint close at the entrance of Mae Sot. They seemed to have been going back to the refugee camps for the registration. Likewise, the project generated the great centripetal movement from other parts of Thailand to the camps in addition to inducing the cross-border movement.

Above all, resettlement programs accelerated population movement from Burma. Thus, though, as mentioned earlier, 46,388 people left the borderland, the total number of residents in the refugee camps never decreased. It is mainly because people, whether they are "genuine" refugees or not, keep coming over to the camps from Burma.

It is interesting to notice that human flows created by resettlement programs reflect the current phase of population movement where the international actors are involved in actions for the advocacy of human rights. This makes a difference in the pattern of the movement between the past and the present time. The involvement of the international actors makes the social system of the border town much more fluid, vibrant and dynamic.

Capital advancement and development projects

Mae Sot is a very promising town for those who have ambitions to expand their economic gains since it provides cheap laborers as well as potential opportunities for cross-border business and investment in Burma. Hence the town sees the participation of many outside people who have resources and capital. First, this section deals with the current phase of border trade and the fact that the locals are losing their stakes to outside people. Second, it takes a look at the relocation of factories and patterns of production as well as the relations between employers and employees. Here I identify how exogenous the operation of the factories is and how the current stage of people's relations has changed. Finally, this section touches on economic development projects that are being extensively undertaken by the state in cooperation with international bodies such as the ADB. The state is itself one of the active participants in exploiting the town and the border areas for expanding economic opportunities. The impact of these projects is immense; the landscape of the town is changing with the numerous development projects going on all over town. All in all, it shows that the town does not exist without the

engagement of others, which bring more dynamic features to the social system.

The Encroachment of Bangkok in border trade

One day when I attended a meeting of the Tak Chamber of Commerce,[9] I witnessed serious discussions exchanged among participants on the issue of the encroachment of Bangkok into the border trade. Ekamon first raised his concern, stating that,

> In the past, the main participants in the border business were the people of Mae Sot. Though commodities were ordered from Bangkok, these had to stay for some days in Mae Sot before crossing the border and left considerable margin here. But nowadays these go directly to Burma without necessarily staying in Mae Sot due to the development of road conditions. Now Bangkok businessmen directly contact partners in Rangoon and initiate shipment instantly to the Burmese side through Mae Sot. Mae Sot is becoming a mere transit point for them and thus margin generated from the border trade for Mae Sot is declining.

His statement prompted many participants to express themselves regarding the current patterns of border trade and converge on the concerns over the massive participation of outside people in the border business, notably from Bangkok. Someone recollected the hectic days of the black markets, the time when Mae Sot enjoyed an exclusively central position under the circumstance that inconvenient road conditions restricted Bangkok's portion of border trade. Their concerns that poured out during the meeting reflected the reality of the current phase of border trade. The Chief Officer of Mae Sot Custom Office revealed to me in June 2005 that Bangkok's portion of the export volume to Burma through Mae Sot was 20% with the rest from Mae Sot and Bangkok's participation was increasing.

Though in the past, it also saw the participation of outside people, they were soon localized and became permanent settlers in the border, with their businesses centered in Mae Sot. This was mainly due to the inconvenient transportation system that restricted their mobility between Bangkok and Mae Sot. However, due to the current massive

[9] Since Mae Sot-based businessmen dominate the Tak Chamber of Commerce, most of organization activities take place in Mae Sot and the main office is also located in Mae Sot.

improvement of road conditions and communication technology, outside participants do not necessarily pursue permanent settlement to engage in the border trade. The infrastructure development gives easy access to the trade, opening up new challenges and tensions for the locals.

Relocation of factories

Besides border trade, other economic spheres of the town saw enormous increases of outside participation, especially in the industrial sector. The number of factories increased from 118 in 1993 to 218 in 2000. As of 2009, 300 factories are estimated to operate in Mae Sot (Asia Times 1 September 2009). It is said that 80% of factory owners are non-locals. The introduction of factories changed the economic landscape of the town. The commerce-centered pattern of the town's economy operated by indigenous people gave way to the industry-driven pattern of the economy employing temporary migrants who had recently crossed the border. The number of Burmese factory workers in factories increased throughout the years: 3,708 in 1993, 4,716 in 1995, 6,735 in 1997, and 14,793 in 2000 (Maneeong 2006: 14), and as recent as January 2005, it increased to 31,196 Burmese. However, the actual number is assumed to be higher because this figure only includes registered workers.

The operation style of these factories, mainly garment factories, is very alien to the local context. The production orders are from Bangkok and other countries in the subcontracted form, not reflecting the need of the locals. And their products are sent to Bangkok or exported to other countries, not circulated and consumed among the locals. Also raw materials are delivered from Bangkok not from local areas (Maneepong 2006: 18). Production volume is not controlled by the local demand but by the demand of external contractors in the global supply chain (Arnold 2006; Arnold and Hewison 2005). In the same way, the economic contribution of Burmese workers is not for local consumption but for global consumption, which is quite different from in the past when their labor was intimately associated with local consumption needs.

As the factories do not closely attach themselves to local needs but are instead only interested in taking advantage of the cheap labor costs, it is highly possible that they could shut down at anytime and move to other places which provide cheaper costs. The global supply chain to which most of the factories in Mae Sot are tied accelerates this movement. Besides, competition with other countries such as China intensifies unstable

and fluctuating production in Mae Sot. One day, when I visited Nukphan's factory, I saw a sizeable number of machines not in operation. I asked why the machinery was idle. The reply to my question was that since nowadays many orders had turned to China it was seldom possible to fully utilize all of the machines. It demonstrates again that production control is not based on local conditions but on global demand with so much vulnerability to global competition.

The expansion of the industrial sector has changed relation patterns among people in Mae Sot. Unlike previous relations based on unorganized interactions and patron-client networks, now contractual and organized relations between employers and employees have become prevalent. Hence, formal negotiations rather than informal consensus have become the principal form of communication. Various other means in pushing forward their interests are employed. For example, Burmese workers at times resort to strikes and sabotages when they feel their treatment by their employers unfair. They have come to be conscious of their rights as laid down by the regulations and have employed those tactics. Nukphan and Suanpha encountered such actions by their workers. Especially when they took on a new large volume of product orders and began to operate producing lines, they often confronted situations in which their workers raised strikes in an attempt to ensure their overtime charges beforehand. It shows that the workers know how to deal with their employers by means of collective action.

A news report attested to this point. According to the report, 700 Burmese workers at a garment factory near Mae Sot walked off the job in protest at low pay and other conditions of employment (Irrawaddy 12 September 2006). There were even cases of legal actions taken by Burmese workers. For example, according to a report of the Irrawaddy on 27 March 2006, nearly 300 Burmese workers from three garment factories in Mae Sot filed legal actions in a local labor court against the factory owners, claiming they had been underpaid over the past two years. There was a case of legal victory for Burmese workers. On 24 August 2004, the Thai labor court in Tak Province ruled that the owner of the Nut knitwear factory in Mae Sot must pay eighteen of his former workers a total of 1,170,000 baht in back pay and compensation for abusive treatment at the workplace. Indeed they finally received compensation on 7 October 2004 for unpaid back wages and exploitation (Irrawaddy 8 October 2004).

Here we observe the involvement of domestic and foreign activist groups in cooperation with the labor organizations of the Burmese themselves. In fact, in the above case of legal victory, the groups such as the Chiang Mai-based Migrant Assistance Program, the Thai Human Rights Commission and the Law Society provided the workers with legal assistance, protection, food and shelter in collaboration with Yaung Chi Oo Burmese

Worker's Association, according to the above report. In relation to this connections with outside groups strengthened and Burmese workers became more and more aware of their rights. This fact shows that the current state of Mae Sot's human relationships experience the active engagement of non-local or exogenous groups regarding the issues of human rights and labor rights, which markedly distinguishes the patterns of human relations from the past.

Massive economic development projects

Mae Sot became incorporated in the administrative system of the state as the 19th century turned to the 20th. However, the influence of the state at that time was only seen in the administrative sector. Throughout most of the last century, the penetration of the state in the border areas was halted due to inadequate transportation and communication, insurgent movements, and less promising economic opportunities in comparison to the central area of the country. Yet since the latter part of the 1980s, the state has been strengthening its involvement in the town to appropriate the border as an entry point to advance into Burma.

Over the 1990s and the 2000s, the attempts of the state to exploit the border resulted in concrete strategies and ideas. In the seventh development plan (1992-96) laid down by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), border towns were referred to as new economic bases for stimulating decentralization by linking regional cities to peripheral areas (Maneepong 2002/2003: 77). In the eighth development plan (1997-2001), it was identified that opportunities for industrial development should be created by the establishment of special economic zones and tax-free zones along the borders in order to promote trade and investment both inside Thailand and with neighboring countries (Tsuneishi 2005: 6). Also in the ninth development plan (2002-2006), the development of border provinces and towns draws special attention. In the plan, balanced regional development and the strengthening of economic relations and mutual prosperity in regions were stressed. It was also mentioned that regional competitiveness through expanding markets and bargaining power over trade, investment and economic cooperation was necessary (Tsuneishi 2005: 6).

Not only through the domestic national plan but also through economic cooperation strategies with neighboring countries, the Thai government is pushing forward its development ideas for the border areas. In 1992, the GMS Program was engendered as a

result of an agreement regarding economic integration among Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Yunnan Province of China; in 1993, the Indonesia-Thailand-Malaysia Growth Triangle (ITM-GT) was set up; in 1997, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) was established, the name of which was changed in July 2004 to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation; and in 2003, Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) which is just called the Economic Cooperation Strategy (ECS) was formed (Tsuneishi 2005: 12).

Among the programs, the ECS comprising of Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand with Vietnam becoming a member in 2004 is the most significant in the direction of Thai policy since it is devised to implement the decisions and ideas created in the GMS Program by Thai Initiative (Tsuneishi 2005: 12). The ECS is based on two inter-related core promises: to reduce illegal migrant workers in Thailand, particularly in the Bangkok and central regions; and to concurrently decrease income disparity in the Greater Mekong Sub-region by relocating light manufacturing and agricultural production to border areas with the use of the cheap labor and resources of neighboring countries (Arnold 2006: 27-28). A cornerstone of the ECS is to set up four Special Border Economic Zones (SBEZ, more commonly referred to as SEZ) in Mae Sot-Myawaddy (Burma), Mukdahan-Savannakhet (Laos), Trat-Koh Kong (Cambodia) and the Chiang Rai SEZ (Arnold 2006: 28).

These programs are sponsored by international bodies such as the ADB and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). For example, the ADB approved $1.2 billion in loans from 1992 to 2003 for regional development projects and mobilized another $922 million in co-financing. In addition, the ADB together with cofinanciers and GMS governments has provided $79 million in technical assistance for projects preparation and for studies to promote effectiveness (ADB 2004: 27).

Mae Sot has been situated in the vortex of these massive programs. In particular Mae Sot lies in the East-West Economic Corridor which connects Da Nang in Vietnam and Moulmein in Burma via Mukdahan in Thailand and Savannakhet in Laos which the GMS Program identifies as one of flagship programs.[10] In the Corridor, Mae Sot plays a role

[10] To further focus on the GMS Program, eleven flagship programs were identified and endorsed at the GMS Ministerial Conference of the ten-year GMS Strategic Framework. These programs are as follows: North-South Economic Corridor; East-West Economic Corridor; Southern Economic Corridor; Telecommunications Backbone; Regional Power Interconnection and Trading Arrangements; Facilitating Cross-Border Trade and Investment; Enhancing Private Sector Participation and Competencies; Developing Human Resources and Skills Competencies; Strategic Environment Framework; Flood Control and Water Resource Management; and GMS Tourism Development (ADB 2002: 32). For details on each

of a node connecting between Burma and Thailand.

To implement this plan, concrete development projects have begun to be implemented. Construction of a 17km road between Mae Sot and Myawaddy sponsored by the Thai government was completed in May 2006 and the extension of the road to Moulmein is expected to go ahead (Irrawaddy 31 May 2006). The road construction connecting Mae Sot and Pa-an in Myanmar the length of which is 153km was requested by Burma in 2003. Thailand was scheduled to grant 80 million baht to improve the existing road in the first place. This 153km construction is an ambitious plan for Thailand to become a crucial point along the East-West Economic Corridor to transport goods from India to Vietnam (Tsuneishi 2005: 17). Here the importance of Mae Sot as a node in this plan is conspicuous.

As mentioned above, the government has pushed forward concrete steps in establishing the Special Economic Zone in Mae Sot and its vicinities. On 19 October 2004 when former Prime Minister Thaksin and his cabinet members held a mobile meeting in Mae Sot, the cabinet approved the setting-up of the Special Economic Zone in Mae Sot, Phop Phra and Mae Ramat districts. Mae Sot is to be developed as the center for industry, commerce and tourism whereas Phop Phra and Mae Ramat are to be the center of the agricultural industry. It was agreed that the government gives various tax and labor incentives to induce investors into the Special Economic Zone. Also in the plan, the establishment of duty-free shops, transport and packaging centers and warehouses was included. To facilitate transport and travel, more hotels and hostels would be built. Other projects that won the approval of the cabinet on that day included a 40 million baht expansion project for the Tak-Lansang section of Tak-Mae Sot road; a 192.2 million flood prevention project for Mae Sot Municipality; a 46.55 million baht tap water system for the new zone; and a 50 million baht illegal alien labor deportation center. The cabinet also agreed on feasibility studies for such projects as the development of Mae Sot airport, the setting-up of manufacturing bases in Tak's industrial estates and the construction of a Mae Sot cargo terminal. The ultimate objective of the plan of the Special Economic Zone is to turn Mae Sot and its vicinities into a major industrial base for the Greater Mekong Subregional Development Project (Bangkok Post 20 October 2004; MOCT News 19 October 2004; Tsuneishi 2005: 20-21).

Not only in Mae Sot, but in nearby Burmese towns such as Myawaddy, Pa-an and Moulmein, the Thai government attempted to engage in the establishment of industrial zones as part of the projects of the ECS. The Thai industrial Estate Authority surveyed the project zones and completed a feasibility study as recently as July 2006. The project is to

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program, see ADB (2002: 57-72).

provide enough local employment to halt the Burmese from illegally entering Thailand to work as migrant labors (Irrawaddy 7 August 2006; 27 October 2005).

Throughout my stay in Mae Sot, I encountered various responses to the plan of the Special Economic Zone from the locals. Indigenous civil groups such as Mae Sot Civil Society mentioned that in principle they agreed on the plan to develop Mae Sot. Yet while they agreed that Mae Sot would be a center for commerce and tourism, they expressed a very critical viewpoint towards an industrial center, highlighting that they thought it would lead to the serious deterioration of the town's environment. In fact, the current condition of Mae Sot's environment is bad due to over-population and the sprawling of factories. The future industrial development, according to them, would create appalling environmental problems for the town. This concern was shared by many other activists nationwide. When the government approved the draft bill on Special Economic Zones in the form of a Cabinet resolution in 11 January 2005, national NGOs and activists criticized that the move to establish Special Economic Zones was unconstitutional as the Zones would be exempted from laws governing national parks, forest reserves, irrigation, labor, the environment and land and thus cause environmental problems. They also mentioned that the bill aimed to transfer the power of the public to a committee on Special Economic Zones headed by Prime Minister and only a small number of investors would be benefit from the Zones (Nation 3 February 2005; 4 February 2005; 6 February 2005; Bangkok Post 13 February 2005).

Factory owners in the town were cautious about the plan because on the one hand, they would benefit from the sponsorship of the state but on the other hand, they would have to face a massive inflow of larger-scale factories and the competition between them would potentially downsize their profits. Local businessmen were also afraid that though the economic pie would be bigger due to the Special Economic Zone, they would lose a sizeable portion of it to outside people equipped with capital and resources under the sponsorship of the government. On the other hand, they expected that Burmese laborers would have more economic opportunities created by this development which would continue to be mainly dependent on cheap laborers from Burma.

At any rate, the plan of the Special Economic Zone gave rise to the economic boom in Mae Sot and its vicinities. For example, it accelerated the sales of property in Mae Sot, Mae Ramat and Phop Phra leading in this regard to 90% increase in 2004 in the wake of the Special Economic Zone. The Mae Sot branch of the Tak Land Office handled transactions valued at 648 million baht in 2004 generating 50 million baht in taxes (Arnold 2006: 30). All over the town, throughout my days there, small and large-scale constructions were underway including the expansion of the Asian Highway. Thai locals

who were conscious of this development prepared themselves to take advantage of the potential opportunities by equipping themselves with Burmese language skills. When I talked with my local classmates in a Burmese language class, they often gave the opinion that having Burmese language ability would be increasingly crucial in the future in doing business with the Burmese in Mae Sot and in nearby Burmese areas. The news of developing the border also attracted a body of Burmese businessmen. I observed that one of my Burmese informants made a phone call to his father in a village near Pa-an and persuaded him to prepare for the future in order to benefit from the development projects. In fact, some Burmese businessmen established some stores like computer shops in Mae Sot and attempted to expand their businesses to the Burmese border areas, basing their businesses in Mae Sot.

Conclusion

This study has dealt with how the forces of human flows and capital advancement affect border society. These forces make the social system of the border town dynamic. Above all, the Burmese migrants' endeavors to advance to Bangkok made a great impact on the society, in particular economic fields. It is evident that their livelihood pursuits are not limited to the borderland but extended to elsewhere, notably Bangkok. The town is a nurturing place for them to adapt to Thai society. Then, taking the border as a springboard, they move on to other places. While the borderland is their living environment on the one hand, it is also a point of embarkation for further advancements. Both characteristics of the border coexist without necessarily dismantling the social system of the border.

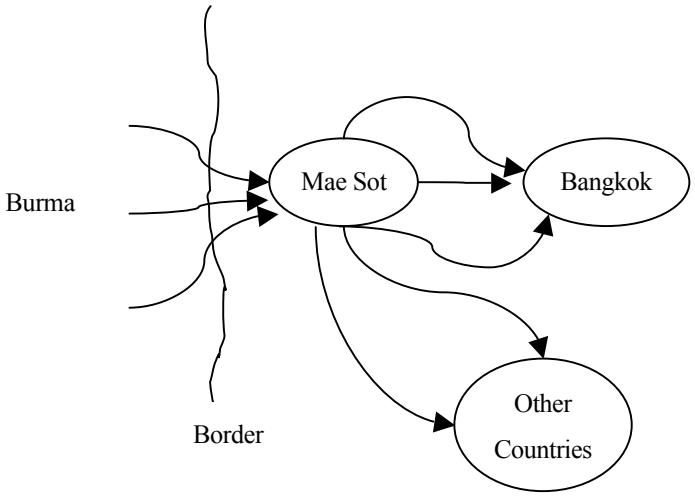
The outflow of people is not the sole phenomenon, as the inflow of people across the border is also a prominent phenomenon in Mae Sot. Though the ebb and flow of population has been an inherent part of the nature of the border area throughout its history, the massive turnaround during present times draws our special attention. The population movements are closely connected to other places including Bangkok. As Hannerz (1996: 67) mentions, Mae Sot as a border town plays the role of a node in interconnectedness.

As global actors such as the UNHCR and the government of Western countries engage in global issues including refugee problems in the borderland, population movements take on a whole new feature. People are able to advance to totally different living environments beyond the borderland with the assistance of global actors. Resettlement programs clearly demonstrate this new phase of population movements in the borderland.

Though this transcendental movement appears to be unnatural and unprecedented, it highlights the current states of human flows in the age of globalization and in the advocacy of movement for human rights.

The above discussion on the movements of the Burmese can be illustrated as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 1 General Direction of Human Flows

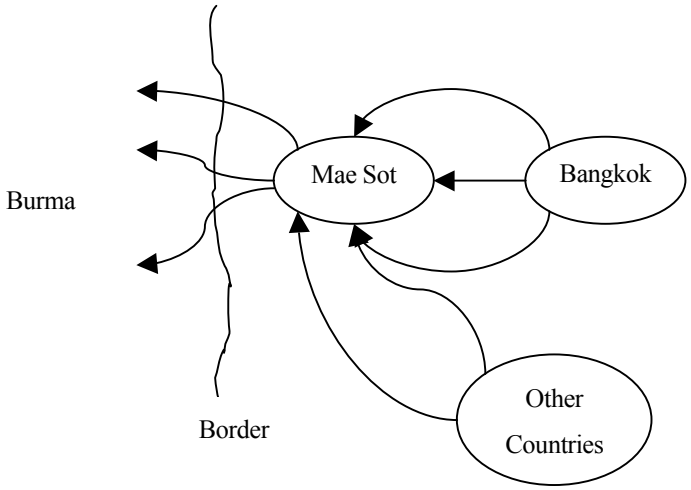


The above figure shows that Mae Sot plays an interconnecting role in the movements of people from Burma. While the Burmese stay in Mae Sot, they go through an adaptation period. Then they embark on another movement to other places such Bangkok and even other countries by means of resettlement programs.

Apart from human flows, Mae Sot encounters the rampant advancement of capital and the state in cooperation with international bodies initiating massive economic development projects in the borderland. Here Mae Sot draws particular attention from the state and capital which attempt to make use of the border town to expand economic opportunities to Burma. The establishment of Special Economic Zone represents the aspirations of the state. The economic development projects are driven by the state's endeavors, in the absence of the participation of the locals, and it is thus exogenous. Production by factories in Mae Sot does not reflect local consumption: products are not circulated within the area in which they were produced and resources are from the outside.

It is against this background that Bangkok businessmen with resources and capital encroach upon the border trade. The enhancement of infrastructure including road conditions and communication technology paves way for them to advance to the borderland with ease. Again as in the case of human flows, Mae Sot mediates as a node in the advancement of capital between Thailand and Burma as is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Direction of Capital



The central government from Bangkok and international economic agencies from other countries advance to the border town. Yet their movements do not terminate at the border. Mae Sot is a stepping stone for the state and international agencies to proceed to Burma. The town provides them with a connection to Burma.

As indicated in the two figures, human beings tend to move from less-developed countries to relatively developed countries while capital tends to flow the other way around. Economic gaps between neighboring countries generate movements of people and capital. This study has demonstrated that border towns playing the role of nodes mediate these flows between Thailand and Burma.

If we put together these two figures, we are provided with a picture in which human flows and capital advancement meet simultaneously in the border town. We need to consider the point that the state's engagement in the border town is not just for economic

purposes but also for legal enforcement i.e. regulating the movement of people. It appears that the penetration of the state and industrial development appear to regulate the town in the state's own right. However, the current stage of development would have not been possible without the participation of unauthorized mobile migrant workers. They have been the essential partners in Mae Sot's development. Future development is also dependant on their labor. However, we must also point out that they should not be considered as being confined to a limited place. This is because once they see other promising opportunities, they transcend the particular place and embark on further movement. In turn, another group of people come over to the border town, contributing to the maintenance of the social system of the town before they too advance to other places. Fluidity is the inherent part of the social system and mobile people are the lifeblood of border society.

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