

[研究論文]

Cross-border Migration in Proximity: Thai-Malay Workers Migrating from Southern Thailand to Northern Malaysia

KLANARONG Nisakorn
Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Thaksin University, Thailand

ISHII Kayoko
Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Science
Toyo Eiwa University, Japan

Introduction

This paper examines how the substantive meaning of national borders becomes weakened—as compared with religious and ethnic differences inside a country—in the context of cross-border labor migration by female Malay-Thai migrant workers (Muslim residents of southern Thailand whose ethnicity is Malay but nationality is Thai). Much, but not all, of the literature on labor migration tends to categorize labor migrants according to their nationality—that is, which country they come from. It is usually only in discussions of refugees that researchers consider ethnicity, its status, and its connotations in the countries of origin. Unlike much of the existing literature on migrant workers, this study investigates why and how Malay-Thai women have been the hidden workers of northern Malaysia for decades, even though their situation as laborers appears unstable.

Our analysis draws on semistructured interviews with numerous female Malay-Thai migrant workers in Langkawi collected during intermittent ethnographic research conducted from the mid-1990s until 2014. Field research was conducted in Kuah and other villages in Langkawi, Malaysia. Interviews were conducted not only at the women's working sites (factories) and residential sites but also in cafes and restaurants in the city. The interviewees were identified both by snowball sampling and through the cooperation of factory owners.

In the sections that follow, we first present the complicated geopolitical background of the Thai-Malay border area, where mainstream and marginalized minorities are intertwined at the local and national levels. This background has generated intricacies regarding religion, ethnicity, and nationality among the local population. Second, we describe the history and current status of labor migration from Thailand to Malaysia in the Thai-Malay border area. Third, we investigate the situation of female Malay-Thai workers who migrate from Satun province, Thailand, to Langkawi in the Malaysian state of Kedah. Finally, we conclude that although female Malay-Thai workers tend to have an unstable status, either legally or economically, as foreign migrant workers, these women and the local bosses/societies have mutually accepted each other since they share local religious beliefs and culture. In short, when viewed as Thai workers who cross the border, these women are regarded as poor, unstable foreign migrant workers. However, seen as Muslim women of the Satun province working in neighboring Kedah, where they share the local religious beliefs and culture, it

is evident they feel more comfortable than they would working in a major Thai city where their culture and beliefs situate them as minorities. Thus, national borders can fade in importance as borders compared to religious and ethnic differences within a country, and ethnic minorities who are marginalized in their country find they have mainstream religious and ethnic identities when they cross national borders.

Theoretical Background regarding Minority Migrant Workers in Border Areas

While numerous studies have investigated transborder migrants in the border areas of Thailand, most have focused on Myanmar migrants who cross into Thailand (Laungaramsri 2012; Lee 2011; Pearson & Kusakabe 2012). Lee (2011) examined the dynamics of the labor migration flow of “Burmese migrant workers” who move through the Thai border town of Mae Sot with the dream of working in Bangkok. Pearson and Kusakabe (2012) investigated the legal and social status of “Burmese women factory workers” in terms of both the legal environment and the women’s perspectives. Most of these studies adopt frameworks in which cross-border migrants are defined according to national categories (e.g., “Burmese migrants” who cross the Thai-Burma national border). This even holds true when the same author (Lee 2011, 2012) investigates “Burmese migrant workers” in one study and “ethnic minority network[s] in and beyond the borderland” in another. Other studies that use the frameworks of ethnic minorities and cross-border migration are discussions of “women’s issues.” Laungaramsri (2001), for example,

discusses how Shan women are alienated from their bodies, and the displacement of the Shan is attributed to national violence in the process of modernization.

In contrast to existing discussions of minority migration in border areas—which tend to adopt the frameworks of human trafficking, displacement, or refugee issues—this study analyzes this phenomenon from the perspective of labor migration based on pragmatic choices. Rather than identifying ethnic minorities as weak, marginalized people, we begin our discussion by framing migrant workers as having their own will and free choice, even if their background is that of an ethnic minority.

Research Objectives

Based on the abovementioned existing literature on migrant workers in Thai border areas, this study investigates how migrant workers in the border areas take advantage of being ethnic minorities when working at factories on the other side of the border. This differs from existing literature focused on human trafficking or the service sector, in which ethnicity, or “minority-ness,” tends to be discussed in terms of weakness. This paper views the cross-border migrant worker’s ethnic minority status as one aspect of her background that affects the choice of destination and employer. In doing so, we aim to broaden the scope of the discussion on the cross-border migration of ethnic minorities by looking beyond human trafficking and the commodification of “weakness” to the paradoxical nature of national borders in the era of globalization.

Geopolitical Background of the Thai-Malay Border Area

The four southern border provinces of Thailand (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun) have special characteristics that differentiate them from other provinces. As Guest and Uden (1994:3) noted, Malay-Thai differ from other Thais in terms of religion, geographical origin, economic and political participation, and some-

times language. While Muslims are a minority in Thailand, most people in the southern border provinces are Muslim: 87.24% in Pattani, 82% in Narathiwat, 79.6% in Yala, and 74.10% in Satun (Pattani Provincial Office 2014; Narathiwat Provincial Office 2014; Yala Provincial Office 2014; Satun Provincial Office 2014). In addition to religion, people in the southern border provinces are often closely related to Malaysians through language as well. This area also has a long history of political and administrative links to the northern part of Malaysia. Before becoming a part of Thailand in the fifteenth century, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat comprised a single Islamic Malayu state governed by a sultan. The first sultan, who converted from Buddhism to Islam, was Sultan Ismaili Shah,

Figure 1. Langkawi, Thai-Malay Border Area



Source: Google Maps (accessed January 20, 2016)

who established the Pattani Islam Malayu state. Based on the recordings of Salasilah Kedah, Setol (or Satul or Satun) was part of Kedah before becoming a province of Thailand. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Pattani's local autonomy gradually eroded, and it came to be ruled by the Kingdom of Siam (the former name of Thailand).

As a result of a Thai-British agreement in 1909, Thai influence declined in the Malayu Peninsula, and Pattani's Malay Muslims became separated from their relatives to the south. Despite national separation, people on opposite sides of the border still visit each other. In other words, this boundary does not stop the flow of people between the two areas. Moreover, the social networks of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin that link them play an important role in facilitating migration to work in Malaysia (Klanarong 2003).

Thai Migrant Workers Abroad

The Thai government has encouraged the migration of Thai workers outside the kingdom since the 1970s. According to Thai laws and regulations, Thais who want to work in other countries have to follow procedures established by the Department of Employment Services. There are five official channels sanctioned by the Department: (1) workers arrange migration by themselves, (2) they are sent by private recruitment agencies, (3) they are sent by the Department of Employment Services, (4) they are sent by employers, or (5) they are sent overseas as "trainees." Although the Thai government encourages Thais to work overseas, there are reg-

ulations to control and protect those who go abroad. In other words, the Department of Employment Services requires many complicated steps and documents for workers to complete the process. These procedures are complex and require both time and money.

Flow of Migrant Workers from Southern Thailand to Northern Malaysia

Most people from the southern border provinces who go to work in Malaysia make their own travel and employment arrangements rather than depend on the Department of Employment Services. A 1940 agreement regarding using a border pass to cross between British Malaya and Thailand is still in effect. This agreement was established to facilitate the travel of people who live in the southern border provinces of Thailand to northern Malaysia. Border passes are issued to people who live along the Thai-Malay border so they can visit friends or relatives on the other side. Using this pass, people from the Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun provinces can travel to the Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan states of Malaysia. They are allowed to stay in Malaysia for no longer than three months at a time. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare does not define people from the southern border provinces who use border passes as “migrant workers”; this is because, officially, they cross the border for a reason other than work. Thus, using border passes reduces many of the Department of Employment Services’ procedures, making it easier to cross the border.

Flow of Labor Migration from Satun to Langkawi

People in Satun and Langkawi Island have longstanding relations mostly based on kinship. This especially applies to people living in the island areas near the Thai-Malay border in the Muang district, including the Jae Bilang subdistrict, the Tum Malang subdistrict, the Koh Sarai subdistrict, the Koh Puyu subdistrict, and Li Peh island, all of which are primarily fishing communities. Marriages have taken place between people from the islands in Satun and Langkawi Island for a very long time. It is known that Thais have been working in Langkawi for more than thirty years. Only a few register for permits and work there legally; the rest use border passes to enter and work illegally (Office of Labor Affairs in Malaysia 2015). More than 10,000 people apply for border passes to travel to Malaysia each year. Most who apply for border passes live in Muang district, followed by La-ngu district and Tha Phae district (Maknuan 2010).

A 2001 survey by the Office of Satun Provincial Employment Service found there were 2,000–2,500 Thai people from the province working in Langkawi. There were 1,400–1,500 male workers from La-ngu district employed on fishing boat crews; there were 400–500 workers in industrial work related to fisheries, of whom 80% were female. Moreover, 400–500 mostly female workers were employed as cooks and servers in food shops, restaurants, and hotels. Some were also construction workers but to a lesser extent (Office of Satun Provincial Employment Service 2001). Chaiyarn (2002) found the following: (1) most migrant workers were female (63.83%); (2) most were from La-ngu district (128 people), followed by Muang

district (102) and Tha Phae district (twenty-five); (3) workers from Satun who traveled to work in Langkawi Island, Malaysia, were mostly below thirty years of age, practiced Islam, and had at most a primary education; (4) most worked in agriculture before working in Langkawi Island; (5) most had an average monthly income of below 3,000 baht; (6) most had insufficient income to make a living before moving to Langkawi Island to work; (7) most owned land; (8) most were workers in small dried fish factories (38.6%), followed by hired laborers (15.9%), shop assistants (10.6%), hotel employees (9.8%), food shop workers or cooks (10%)—the rest worked various other jobs; (9) most earned 5,001–7,000 baht per month from working in Langkawi; (10) most earned enough income to make a living after working in Langkawi Island; and (11) the primary reasons for traveling to work in Langkawi Island were higher wages compared to Satun province.

Malay-Thai Migrant Workers from Satun Working in Small Dried Fish Factories in Langkawi

All female Malay-Thai migrant workers in this study made their own travel arrangements, with the help of friends or relatives, using border passes to work in Langkawi Island. We aimed to examine the “Thai-ness” they employed in small dried fish factories in Langkawi Island and how they displayed “Thai-ness” in crossing the border. Small dried fish, or *ikan bilis*, factories are found in three areas of Langkawi Island: Bukit Malut, Pantai Pasir Hitam, and Taman Nilam. An interview with the president of the small dried fish factory association, Loke Gim San, on September

18, 2013, revealed there are thirty small dried fish factories and forty-two fishing boats in Langkawi Island. The size of the factories varied from one to five units. A one-unit factory consists of one fishing boat and forty workers; a five-unit factory consists of thirty-two fishing crews and eight factory workers.

Workers in small dried fish factories can be divided into two groups: fishing boat crews, which are all male, and factory workers, who are both male and female, with most being female. The former can be divided into two groups: those who catch the fish and those who boil the fish. Among the latter, there are four main jobs: transporting boiled fish from the boat to the factory, baking the fish, separating fish by size and type (both manually and mechanically), and packing the fish. Fishing boats go out to catch fish and return in the same day. Factory employees usually work from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m., take a break, and wait for the boat to return. After the boat docks at the wharf, they return to work. The amount time they work depends on the amount of fish that were caught (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Female Migrant Workers from Satun in a Small Dried Fish Factory in Langkawi (photo by Klanarong)



Female Malay-Thai Migrant Workers as Unstable Cheap Migrant Workers

Employers provide room and board for Thai workers in small dried fish factories. Single workers live on the top floor of the factory; married workers have separate rooms or houses near the factory. The employer provides mattresses, blankets, pillows, mosquito nets, and fans; televisions and refrigerators are available in common areas. Workers in the factory receive three meals a day, and each factory has a regular chef. Workers also have the option to cook their own meals. In some factories, the cooks receive money from the employer to buy groceries, or the employer buys raw food, such as chicken and vegetables, and dry food such as rice, fish sauce, onions, garlic, etc. When factory workers have minor illnesses, the workplace provides medicine. If they require medical attention, they are compensated for the expenses. If the illness is serious and cannot be treated in a few days, the employer will send the worker back to Thailand and pay for all travel and medical expenses. After getting well, the worker can return to work with the same employer. Based on the interviews, most workers seemed satisfied with the benefits they received.

Thai-Malay Workers as Muslim Women in Proximity

Workers in small dried fish factories usually work with colleagues either from the same village or from other Thai villages. They help each other because they often knew each other before coming to work in Langkawi Island. Some are siblings or other types of relatives who are invited to work together, and they are

able to work in harmony. Some female workers have gone to college in Malaysia or Indonesia. However, they generally do not have conflicts with workers from other countries because they are able to communicate easily: most female workers can speak and understand the Malay dialect or Standard Malay. Fifty-five-year-old Ka Ma was single, graduated in year 12, and was born in Kampang subdistrict, La-ngu district, Satun province. She said, “The workers in this factory consist of three males and five females. Two of them are from Koh Sarai subdistrict, in the Muang district of Satun province. The other six come from Ban Taloh Sai, Taloh Sai subdistrict, in the La-ngu district of Satun province. The workers employed here are mostly invited by friends from the same village when there are positions available, so most of them are relatives. The language used to communicate is Southern Thai because they are all from Satun.”

Women workers in this study were mostly satisfied with their employers, who were kind, treated them equally, and did not take advantage of them. Chinese employers are known to allot *Ang pao* (extra money) for workers during the Chinese New Year. Some women employed at small dried fish factories had worked with the same employer for more than ten years, showing they were highly satisfied with their employers. They did not have problems communicating since the workers were able to speak Malayu and Standard Malay; some Malaysian employers could also speak Thai. Another interview was with a small dried fish factory worker who was hired in 1987 at age twenty-seven as a chef and had worked continuously for the same factory since then. Her husband was a member of the

fishing crew for the same employer; she stated that her employer took very good care of her.

Ambiguity between Alien and Neighbor

Migrant workers from Satun province use border passes to travel to Malaysia, where most work without a work contract. They work for a certain time, but there are no set limits on the period of employment; the amount of time depends on the workers themselves. If they are dissatisfied with their employment, they either return to Thailand or look for new work. If they are satisfied, they come back to work with the same employer again. Da (twenty-eight years old) was from Laem Son subdistrict in the La-ngu district of Satun province. She came to work in Langkawi because her relative, who already worked in the factory, told her to come. At the time, she was unemployed. Another worker said, “I came because I had no job at home. The factory needed workers and sought people to work for them. So, I followed my friend to come work here.”

All small dried fish factory migrant workers in this study were satisfied with their employers. This was because employers treated them equally, did not take advantage of them, and were kind. Some workers had been with the same employer for more than ten years. One worker at Bukit Malut, who had been with the factory since 1987, had worked as a cook and had also separated dried fish by size and type. Her husband was a fishing boat crew member with the same employer. She had remained with the same factory and employer all along. She said the employer took “good care” of her and the other workers. She further explained that if there was a

lot of fish, the employer would hire local people to help mitigate the workload. The tendency to continue working at the same factories suggests that Thai migrant workers are satisfied with their employers. Employers were also found to be satisfied with their employees. An employer noted that Thai migrant workers worked hard, had a good sense of responsibility, and were honest. Information provided by Langkawi Island institutions (the Head of Maritime Enforcement, General Manager of Langkawi Development Authority [LADA], Chief of Police, Chief of Immigration Office, and President of Langkawi Municipal) indicated that locals were fond of Thai workers because they were courteous, respectful of locals, generous, hardworking, and proficient (Office of Labor Affairs in Malaysia 2015).

Thus, the aspects of “Thai-ness” that female migrant workers have created in small dried fish factories are responsibility, hard work, and honesty. One employer said that in the “last twenty years, workers were all from La-ngu district. I asked my relative in La-ngu to recruit workers for me. Thai workers came to work here as there were no jobs in La-ngu. They worked hard because they wanted to earn more money. Coming to work here enabled them to buy land, to plant rubber trees, and to build big houses in La-ngu.” This quality of “Thai-ness” has made employers trust their Thai migrant workers. The relationships between employers and migrant workers have gradually changed from business-like ties to kin-like ties. Employers ask their workers to recruit new workers from Thailand to work in their factories because they trust them. Thus, migrant workers in small dried fish factories in Langkawi

Island use their Thai image to expand their social network to relatives and friends in their own villages or in other Thai villages. In addition to being considered trustworthy sources by employers for finding new workers, people with migration experience can also help relatives and friends in their villages get jobs in Langkawi. Workers in small dried fish factories in Langkawi Island are usually recruited by personal contact or via social networks that link villages with the destination areas. It is evident, therefore, that public resources (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, or government employment agencies) as well as private employment agencies are relatively unimportant for migrant workers seeking work in small dried fish factories in Langkawi.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to highlight specific forms of locality and proximity in the field of cross-border migrant work. Labor migration between Satun and Langkawi, as well as the specific workplace choices made by female Malay-Thai migrant workers, has been ongoing for a long time. In our investigation of the reasons for such continuity, we concluded that the meanings of official boundaries between Thailand and Malaysia are weakened when local people choose their workplaces, even though such borders create economic gaps on each side. Malay-Thai Muslims in this area consider working in Malaysia a customary part of their livelihood, both culturally and socially. Despite the fact that discussions based on national-level statistics regard them as unstable low-income migrant workers, their life histories can be interpreted such that their status as

employees is actually quite stable. This phenomenon can be understood as a kind of local migration from rural areas to major industry areas in the same local domain where there is a shared religion and culture. Malay-Thai women from Satun feel more comfortable working in Langkawi—where their culture and beliefs are shared by the mainstream population—than in Hat Yai or another major Thai city, where they are essentially minorities. They are much more comfortable crossing the national border between Thailand and Malaysia than crossing ethnic, religious, or cultural borders within Thailand.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) as part of the research project, “Migrant Network as Survival Strategy for Minorities in the Global Era” (2012–2015, no. 24617020, Kayoko Ishii). It was also supported by the Heiwa Nakajima Foundation as part of the research project, “Empirical Analysis of the Transborder Network of Business and Migrant Work in Southeast Asia” (2013).

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近接性ゆえの越境移住 —南タイからマレーシア北部への マレー系タイ人移民労働者—

ニサコーン・クラナローン
(タクシン大学 人文社会科学部 准教授 (タイ))

石井 香世子 (本学 国際社会学部 准教授)

要 約

本稿では、国民国家の周辺に位置づけられている国境地帯に暮らすエスニック・マイノリティにとっては、国民国家の境界を越えるほうが、宗教・文化の境界を越えるよりはるかに容易な行為として認識され、それが彼らのライフコースに影響を与えていることを、移民労働者に対するフィールド調査をもとに描き出す。

具体的には、長年にわたってマレーシア領ランカウイへ労働者を供給している南タイのサトゥン県のマレー系タイ人に着目し、なぜ彼ら/彼女らはタイ南部の産業が発達した地域ではなく、国境を越えてランカウイへ移民労働する習慣を維持しているのかを分析した。国境地帯のマイノリティによる越境移住労働については、国家とジェンダーを軸とした人身売買に関する研究の蓄積が多いのに対し、本稿では小規模水産加工業の現場で工場労働者として働く、移民女性労働者に着目する。これにより、本稿ではマイノリティによる主体的な就労(地)選択の構造を描き出し、そこから浮かび上がる、国境地帯における共同体意識と国民国家との境界の乖離を分析していく。