

Minority Migrant Networks Scattered Across Thailand, Malaysia, and Countries Further Away: Research Scope and Plan

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Abstract

The purpose of this presentation is to share the theoretical framework of our collaborative research entitled “Migrant Networks as a Survival Strategy for Minorities in the Global Transborder Migration of Minorities in Mainland Southeast Asia.”

Our multidisciplinary research group aims to determine how globalization affects the life course of minorities by focusing on the extension of their transborder migration networks. This three-year project commenced in June 2012 and is scheduled to end in January 2015. The research group consists of five researchers: Prof. Masami Fujimaki (Japan), Dr. Nisakorn Klanarong (Thailand), Dr. Suttiporn Bunmak (Thailand), Dr. Mala Rajo Sathian (Malaysia), and Kayoko Ishii (Japan), who is the group’s organizer.

Few preceding studies have focused on how the increase of transborder migration affects the lives of minority communities. Moreover, existing studies on minorities and transborder migration tend to focus on women in the service sector or on human trafficking. In this study, the term “minority” includes people who have been marginalized in the process of nation building. We consider all kinds of minorities, including ethnic and religious minorities.

In this research, we focus on the migration network across the Thai–Malaysia border, which has extended to cities that are further away from the border. Minority migrants within the network and subsequent phenomenon are also within the scope of our research. Through this research, we expect to determine the following.

- 1) How do minority migrant network expand (the formation of minority migrant networks)?
- 2) How do minority migrant networks work (the function of minority migrant networks)?
- 3) What are the particularly interesting dimensions and the academic significance of these networks?

In conclusion, researchers in different fields should share information on how globalization affects minority communities.

Keywords: Migration, Minority, Border, Thailand, Malaysia

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Introduction

The aim of this presentation is to share the theoretical framework of our collaborative research entitled “Migrant Networks as a Survival Strategy for Minorities in the Global World Transborder Migration of Minorities in Mainland Southeast Asia.”

Our multidisciplinary research group is studying how globalization affects the lives of minorities by focusing on the extension of transborder migration networks of minorities. This is a three-year project that commenced in June 2012 and is scheduled to end in January 2015. The research group consists of five researchers: Prof. Masami Fujimaki (Japan), Dr. Nisakorn Klanarong (Thailand), Dr. Suttiporn Bunmak (Thailand), Dr. Mala Rajo Sathian (Malaysia), and Kayoko Ishii (Japan), who is the group’s organizer.

Kayoko Ishii has researched ethnic minorities from a sociological perspective. She has focused on the Hilltribal people (*Akha* people), an ethnic minority originating in northern Thailand, who live an urban life, and rely on tourism for their income. She investigated whether their participation in the international tourism industry improved their quality of life. Since she has conducted her field research in northern Thailand, she has learned that it is common for them to migrate transnationally. In other words, daily life in the minority community is deeply embedded in a transborder minority network, not only economically, but also socially and culturally. She went on to focus on how transborder migration changes their lives. As she started researching minority migrant networks, she found that some ethnic minorities from the Thai-Myanmar area tend to migrate to the Thai-Malaysia border area.

Subsequently, she realized that there must be a particular connotation of “border area” with regard to the survival strategy of the minorities. Research on minorities has frequently indicated that these groups have been marginalized in the process of nation building throughout the twentieth century. This research delves into the connotation of the term “border area” for these groups. It tries to answer questions such as the following: What does “border area” connote for these groups? Being on the “margins” of the nation state, the complexity and fluidity of diverse people and norms, or something else?

Theoretical Background

In preceding works on migration, some well-known research has focused particularly on how the expansion of transborder migration has affected minority lives and communities (Askew, 2009; McCaskill et al., 2008). In this research, “minorities” refers to those groups of people who have, at some time, been marginalized in the process of nation

building (Winichakul, 1994). Other research on minorities and transborder migration has concentrated on women in the service sector, human trafficking, and laborers in the service sector (Marc, 2009).

Many studies have focused on the intra/international migration of the people from the Thai rural area (Daniel, 2004; Horstmann, 2009; Womg, 2011); however, most of them focused on poor farmers there. On the other hand, there are many books on undocumented migrant flows in Asia (Battistella & Asia, 2003; Dauverge, 2008; Alaire, 2007), but they seldom pursue the “minority” aspects of these undocumented migrants.

Overall Theme

This collaborative research aims to analyze the formation, function, and connotation of transborder migration networks of minorities. A noteworthy aim of this analysis is to delve into the connotation of the term “border area” for such people. Does it connote being on the “margins” of the nation state, or the complexity and liquidity of diverse people and norms, or something else?

Research Scope

In this research, we stress on the migration networks that cross the Thai-Malaysia border and extend to more distant cities. Minority migrants within the networks and subsequent phenomena are also within the scope of our research.

In this research, we do not limit the meaning of “border area” to a mere geographical border area located between two countries (Thailand and Malaysia in this case). Rather, any space belonging to a minority migrant network where minorities find their niche living space will be regarded as a border area for this study. It may be any community in cities scattered within and around Malaysia or even countries further away.

In addition, the targeted minorities are not necessarily restricted to the Hilltribal people from northern Thailand. Any minority group will be within the scope of our research.

Through this research, we aim to determine the following:

- 1) How do minority migrant networks expand (the formation of minority migrant networks)?
- 2) How do minority migrant networks work (the function of minority migrant networks)?
- 3) What are the particularly interesting dimensions and the academic significance of these networks?

Research on how globalization affects a minority that was once marginalized in the process of nation building should be of general academic interest.

Personal Research Plan

Kayoko Ishii's personal research plan is to pursue (1) the transborder life strategy of Tai Yai female migrants who originate in the northern Thai border and migrate to the southern Thai border, as well as that of the children born to such migrants; and (2) the migrant network of male KMT descendants scattered in "Chinese" cities around Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan.

(1) Tai Yai female migrants and their life strategies

Female laborers engaged in the service sector are mainly migrant workers from outside the area. This is true of the tourist area expanding around the Thai-Malay border area. The female migrant workers include Thais from another area of Thailand, foreigners (from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia), and whom local people refer to as "Chinese Shans" or "Burmese Shans."

Conducting pre-field research in the Thai-Malay border area, Ishii found that the "Chinese Shans" or "Burmese Shans" are actually Tai Yai and Tai Lue people whose hometown is in the Thai-Myanmar border area. The results of this research showed that these female migrants pursue their own life strategies, which would have impossible to do within their hometown. The research also tries to answer questions such as the following: Does the southern Thai border area serve as an area where these female migrants can meet Malaysian men?

(2) KMT-descendant male migrants

It is also common to find Chinese-speaking "Thai" hotel staff in tourist towns in the Thai-Malay border area. They speak Chinese fluently, their appearance is Chinese, and they identify themselves as ethnic Chinese, although they are of Thai nationality. Those people are descendants of former KMT soldiers.

These hotel staff members say that they have been working in several cities in southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan, always under a "Chinese" boss. This signifies that their "Chinese-ness," once persecuted in Thailand, is now a means of survival in the transborder labor market. How did the connotation of their Chinese-ness change, and does it really improve the life of such KMT descendants, or are they still a means of cheap transborder labor?

Ishii intends to pursue the connotation of transborder migration networks and their

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function to analyze how transborder migration changes the lives of minorities.

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