

บันทึกชีวิตด้วย ‘หัวใจ’ และ ‘หัวใจ’:  
บทเรียนวิธีวิทยาจากการศึกษา  
ภาคสนามคนงานไทยในประเทศสิงคโปร์  
Headnotes, Heartnotes and  
Persuasive Ethnography of Thai  
Migrant Workers in Singapore

พัฒนา กิตติอาษา  
Pattana Kitiarsa

บทคัดย่อ

ในช่วงปี พ.ศ. 2547 ถึง 2549 ที่ผมทำงานวิชาการที่มหาวิทยาลัยแห่งชาติสิงคโปร์ ผมใช้เวลาส่วนหนึ่งศึกษาภาคสนามทางมานุษยวิทยาเกี่ยวกับชีวิตและชุมชนคนงานไทยในประเทศสิงคโปร์ ผมจะใช้เนื้อหาของบทความนี้คิดทบทวนเกี่ยวกับบทบาทในสนามและประสบการณ์ในการทำงานวิจัยช่วงดังกล่าวของตนเอง ผมนำเสนอว่า งานวิจัยภาคสนามทางชาติพันธุ์วรรณาเป็นกระบวนการที่ผูกพันแน่นแฟ้นอยู่กับประสบการณ์ชีวิตมนุษย์และความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมของผู้คนที่ผู้วิจัยต้องใช้ความทุ่มเทพยายามในการบันทึกชีวิตด้วย ‘หัวใจ’ และ ‘หัวใจ’ ผมให้ความหมายของการบันทึกชีวิตด้วยหัวใจว่าเป็นการเก็บรวบรวมและบันทึกข้อมูลจากประสบการณ์ภาคสนามไว้ในหน่วยความจำของสมอง ส่วนการบันทึกชีวิตด้วยหัวใจเป็นมิติของจริยธรรมวิชาชีพและความรับผิดชอบทางมโนธรรมสำนึกของผู้วิจัย การบันทึก ชีวิตทั้งสองส่วนเป็นกระบวนการและวิธีการทำงานภาคสนามที่ผมใช้เพิ่มเติมจากการใช้เครื่องมือวิจัยมาตรฐานทั่วไป การบันทึกชีวิตด้วยหัวใจและหัวใจเป็นฐานสำคัญในการเขียนงานทางชาติพันธุ์วรรณาที่กระตุ้นเร้าความสนใจของผู้อ่านด้วยเรื่องเล่าของชีวิตและตัวตน เป้าหมายสำคัญของการเขียนงานชาติพันธุ์วรรณา

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ลักษณะดังกล่าวก็คือ การนำเสนอมุมมองชีวิตมนุษย์ และเรื่องเล่าของคนงานไทยโดยเฉพาะคนงานอีสานที่ต้องตกอยู่ในสถานการณ์ขายขอบและความเป็นอื่น อันเป็นลักษณะสำคัญของชีวิตคนขายแรงที่ต้องร้างไกลจากครอบครัวและถิ่นฐานบ้านเรือนของตนเอง

## Abstract

During my academic appointments at National University of Singapore between 2004 and 2006, I spent a great portion of time to carry out ethnographic research on Thai migrant workers in Singapore. In this article, I rethink my multiple “field roles” and reflect on my fieldwork experiences. I argue that ethnographic research is deeply embedded in complex human relationships, which demand some committed and engaged endeavors from the fieldworker through the works of headnote and heartnote. The headnote, which refers to mentally recorded sets of information produced out of the fieldworker’s being-there experience, is essential to make the fieldnotes, while the heartnote, or the inner voice from the heart, urges the fieldworker to uphold his or her professional ethics and moral responsibility. Both headnote and heartnote form a strong foundation for the ethnographer to write persuasive ethnography filling with human sensibility. The human stories, which I had collected through the cultivation of the head and the heart, present some compelling angles of marginal and transient life of migrant workers in their transnational acts of border-crossing and of working and living away from home.

## Headnotes, Heartnotes and Persuasive Ethnography of Thai Migrant Workers in Singapore<sup>1</sup>

Pattana Kitiarsa<sup>2</sup>

Ottenberg (1990) argues that ‘headnotes’ are fundamental for an ethnographer both during and post fieldwork courses. By headnotes, he simply refers to the notes, which are in the head. He maintains that “I remember many things, and some I include when I write even though I cannot find them in my fieldnotes, for I am certain that they are correct and not fantasy” (Ottenberg, 1990 : 144). Headnotes are the businesses of mental note-taking which, include some audio, visual and graphic traces containing in the fieldworker’s memories of the field. They are the products of memo-faculties, which can be recalled, retrieved, or reproduced in service of complementing to the fieldworker’s first-hand accounts of ‘being-there-in-the-field’. The headnotes are specifically useful in some sensitive field situations, where the fieldworkers cannot make use of pens, pad-notes, or cameras. Throughout the course of my fieldworks among Thai migrant workers in urban Singapore settings, I have no doubt that ‘trained and experienced’ headnotes emerged as one of many key conceptual tools to gather information, which are substantial to my “construction of fieldnotes” (Atkinson, 1990:57).

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<sup>2</sup> Southeast Asian Studies Program, National University of Singapore

However, ethnographic fieldwork as an academic and human-relations enterprise cannot solely rely on the ‘head’ and what it contains. In this article, I argue that the combination of the ‘head’ and the ‘heart’ is ethically and professionally important. The fieldworker should be able to perform his/her multiple “field roles” (Gold, 2005 : 100) with some senses of commitment and responsibility to the people and communities under study.<sup>3</sup> The headnotes, which refer to mentally recorded sets of information produced out of the fieldworker’s being-there experience, are essential to make the fieldnotes, while the heartnotes, or the inner voice from the heart, urge the fieldworker to uphold his or her professional ethics and moral responsibility. I coin the term ‘heartnote’ to connote some moral and practical roles in which the fieldworker takes part in order to earn him/herself ‘rights’ and ‘authority’ to write about or comment on the complex life situations in question. My priorities in doing fieldwork among the Thai workmen in Singapore through the intensive engagements of headnotes and heartnotes are to produce a persuasive

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<sup>3</sup> All three readers of this article draft mentioned my rather strong tone on ethical and moral commitments of the researcher in his/her field roles. Ethical and moral aspects of fieldwork are apparently sensitive issues, pending very much on one’s personal stance and professional benchmark. I emphasize these aspects without much skepticism due to the following reasons. First, my training background and working experience in the Thai academic community have placed a rather high degree of trust on scholarly professional ethics. Secondly, ethical and moral responsibilities are very central to my “field roles” as a Thai researcher and a Thai/Isan “achan” working among my “own people”, who are economically and sioculturally marginalized in Singapore. For me, discussing issues involving around the head, the heart, and the field roles is deeply intertwined with the ethical or moral sensibility and relationship between the informant and the researcher. Instead of problematizing my own ethnographic position, I have simply embraced it as my professional choice and destiny at least in this research project. I only wish to share my reflexive positionality as a fieldworker working under specific contexts. I have never intended to set up a benchmark for my fellow ethnographers or anyone else.

ethnography of migrant livelihood and subjectivity as much as to fulfill my personal commitments as an expatriate ethnographer volunteering himself to help with some educational tasks for his fellow compatriots away from home. Headnotes provide effective tools for the fieldworker, while heartnotes interject passion into an academic enterprise. Together, they produce an engaged, persuasive ethnography.

The headnotes and heartnotes are particularly needed when one carries out fieldwork among migrant people and their community. They are the products of intensive “body work” and “emotion work” (Sanders, 2006 : 215), in which, the fieldworkers “place their own body alongside that of their respondents as both parties engage in an exchange of watching, analyzing and managing their physical presence and emotional consequences” (Ibid.). Since late January 2004, I have carried out my ethnographic fieldwork among Thai migrant expatriates making their transient livelihood in Singapore. The majority of my informants comprises of male construction workers, cross-border tradeswomen, sex workers, domestic workers, and housewives. These people make up a great portion of an approximate 43,800 Thai expatriate population working and living in this tropical global city (Thailand Ministry of Labour Affairs, 2006 : 141).

I came to Singapore to serve my academic appointments in Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore after spending more than fifteen years doing ethnographic research on aspects of culture and society of Thai-Lao people in my native region of Northeastern Thailand (hereafter, Isan). More than 85% of Thai migrant workers in Singapore are hailed from this region. My informants and I are incorporated into the larger regional labor migratory patterns, which always loom large in a globalizing world. We represent rural peasants as well as professionals who are forced to leave

homes for urban and overseas employments. Beginning in the late 1970s, male and female workers from Thailand have joined the generations of multi-national workforces (e.g., Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines) in their contracted journeys for migrant employments in Singapore (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2005a; Saranya Bunnak and Saowapha Chaimusik, 1985; Wong, 2000). ‘My people’ from Isan and I have found ourselves constituting diasporic “moving targets” (Appadurai, 1999) through the complex labor divisional networks of transnational migration.

I characterize my fieldwork experience in Singapore as a committed and engaged process of ethnographic common sense with an aim to dig deep into the textures of Thai workmen’s everyday life on their cross-border contracted employment missions. Cultural sensitivity and courtesy are among key ingredients for successful fieldwork. They permitted me to “adjust [my own] role-repertoires to research objectives”(Gold, 2005 : 100). I stepped into the world of migrant workers from Thailand in Singapore with a sense of curiosity and excitement. It is my ethnographic urge that I felt most strongly when I walked around the weekend outing spaces in the Golden Mile Complex (Little Thailand)<sup>4</sup> and the Kallang Riverside Park on Beach Road, where male workers (*khon ngan/raeng ngan*), tradeswomen (*maekha*), and some sex workers (*phuying ha kin*) gathered on Sundays. Doing fieldwork requires common sense as much as scientific endeavors in order to make an entry into the social field and establish rapport with the people one wants to study.

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<sup>4</sup> Yeoh, Huang and Gonzalez (1999:124) call the gathering spaces for foreign workers in Singapore as “the weekend enclave”, which is defined as “places which draw large numbers of foreign workers of any one nationality on Sundays such as Lucky Plaza (well-known as “Little Manila”) Zhujiao Marker (gathering ground for Sri Lankan and Indian workers), and Golden Mile Complex (associated with Thai workers)” (see also Yeoh and Huang ,1998).

I found myself talking to men sitting on the floor with used newspapers as their mattresses and having fun with beer or rice whisky and snacks inside the Golden Mile Complex shopping mall, under the residential flats, or in the Park. Cross-border tradeswomen from Hat Yai came to sell the workmen some snacks and occasional sexual services on the weekend via the air-con bus routes between Hat Yai, Malaysia and Singapore.

Most of my informants are men and women speaking a distinctive Thai-Lao dialect. I usually began my chat with them by asking how long they have been working in Singapore, which part of Northeastern Thailand they came from, and what job they are on at the moment. Besides our shared linguistic dialect, we had developed our rapports by locating our places of origin. I came from a rural village in Nong Khai province. My informants either came from different districts in the same province or neighboring provinces, such as Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Udon Thani, and Khon Kaen. My informants were more comfortable once they learned that I am an *achan* (teacher/instructor) working in an established university in Singapore and wished to study about the livelihoods of Thai workers in Singapore. They identify me as a Thai *achan*, who came from their home region of Isan and speak their dialect. Between me and my informants, we are *thai ban deaow kan* (the people of the same origin). From my side, I regarded their status and identity based on the Thai cultural convention of seniority and fictive kinship. Therefore, I addressed my older tradeswoman informants as ‘*pa*’ or ‘*na*’ (aunt) and older workmen as ‘*phi*’ or ‘*ai*’ (older brother) and ‘*nong*’ (younger brother).

My fieldwork roles were indeed dictated by the inner voice from the heart (*hua chai or chai*). I always wish to carry out my fieldwork endeavors with heart and I had gradually learned how to take the heartnotes through time and close social relationships, which I had cultivated with groups of Thai

workmen and officials in charge of Thai Labour Affairs in Singapore. A few months after I had committed myself to the project, I discovered the Friends of Thai Workers Association (FTWA), located on the third level of the Golden Mile Complex. FTWA is sponsored by the Office of Thai Labour Affairs and the Royal Thai Embassy to run educational and cultural activities for benefits of Thai migrant workers. In early 2004, FTWA looked for a volunteer teacher for their English classes and I decided immediately to play my part.

Most Thai workmen with only four or six-year compulsory education attainment have encountered some daunting tasks to overcome language barriers in their workplaces. They speak neither English nor Hokkien or Mandarin. It is difficult for them to communicate with their employers and co-workers from countries like Bangladesh, China, India, and Malaysia. My Basic English courses for Thai construction workers on Sunday evenings have opened to more than hundred of workmen/students in the past three years and a half (early 2004 to mid 2007). They began with a small gathering of less than 10 workers/students, meeting for one and a half hour every Sunday afternoon for 15 weeks. FTWA collected no fee for the course at the beginning, but later charged 1 Singapore dollar per meeting. Besides workmen, there are good numbers of Thai women who married to Singaporean men and who came to work as domestic workers, clerks, or sex workers joining my expanding language classes. I organized my English courses to fit my workers students. In my early days in 2004 and 2005, I mainly relied on Singapore primary school textbooks, but soon discovered that their contents may be simple and suited the non-English speaking beginners, but they are not appropriate for adult learners. Since 2006, together with a Singaporean volunteer teacher, I had turned to a series of special curriculum textbook for working adult learners developed by Institute of Technical Education (ITE).



As my 15-week English courses had expanded, my teaching schedule demanded more time and commitment. Through my volunteered teaching, I have learned not only my proper field roles, but also my true identity of what has made up my selfhood through my teaching volunteer works. I always feel at home to teach and do research as a middle class ethnographer with strong Thai-Lao cultural sensitivity from Isan. In other words, I see my ethnographic fieldwork project as a deep moral mission to serve the community of Thai migrants in Singapore, especially those sharing my ethnocultural backgrounds. I truly identify myself with my own displaced people despite our temporary existence away from home.

My head and my heart usually go hand in hand. My heartnotes particularly through the roles of volunteer teacher and fieldworker usually led me to some further intriguing and exciting headnotes as well as constant fieldnotes, which is illustrated by the convention that “the ethnographer is engaged in ‘writing down’ what goes on” (Atkinson, 1990 : 61). With an extended period of classroom contacts and through joining other Thai migrant activities i.e., May Day celebrations, Thai labor football tournaments, and events to celebrate Thailand’s National Day/His Majesty the King’s Birthday on December 5<sup>th</sup>, I have gradually built up rapports with a group of male informants, who allowed me to visit their dormitories and observe their off-duty leisure night life. I was welcomed to join their leisure activities as *achan* (teacher), who is ‘*khon ban hao*’ (a person coming from our villages in Isan with the same ethnocultural identities). They invited me to hang out with them on numerous occasions in the Kallang Riverside Park, at the beer bars and pubs in Geylang areas, the Golden Mile Complex and the Orchard Tower, and at their living quarters. I received some helpful cooperation throughout my semi-structured interview and participant observation despite the fact that I made series of sensitive enquiries and intrusions into their private life.

The fieldwork is “the basic arts,” argued Wolcott (2005), but the arts of studying the social life of a people must be firmly embedded in the human relations. The social life of the migrants is largely governed by forms of transient cultures, which see how men and women have struggled mightily to survive with their low-skilled labor capitals in a given limited space and time in Singapore. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I had got along very well with male workers, especially students/workmen in my evening English classes and those who were actively involved in occasional activities run by the Office of Labour Affairs and the Royal Thai Embassy. They talked to me, opening their working and living situations both back home in Northeastern Thailand and Singapore. They told me stories and comments on issues, which I raised. They cooperated very well when I requested them to fill in some questionnaire and participate in some focus group discussion sessions (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2006). Somchai, a 29-year-old painter from Sakon Nakhon, and his friends invited me to visit his living quarters both in Jurong East and Kaki Bukit, where thousands of foreign workmen from countries like Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, and Thailand, were housed together by their employers. The hostels for foreign workers were off-limit to visitors, but I was lucky to be allowed in by security guards there. I witnessed how multinational workers were crowded together within limited space and facilities. Sommai from Nakhon Phanom welcomed me to join his soccer team, which he coordinated and entered the annual Thai Labour Cup in 2005. I realized how young, energetic workmen were serious with soccer as a competitive sport and as a pastime. Soccer indeed constitutes a masculine form of social contacts or a social language of workmen from different Thai localities. It brings them together to share and enjoy similar pastime off their laborious daily life (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2005b).

Suspicion and skepticism over my roles as an ethnographer appeared in an unusually high-risk degree from my informants' perspective. Ket, a veteran cross-border tradeswoman, saw me as a secret anti-narcotic police from Bangkok. She saw me as a young, educated Thai with some official obligation. The fact that I came from the same region and speak the same language with her did not make much different to her. She had rough experiences from being searched and interrogated by both Singapore's immigration officials and Thai police in the past few years. She once told me that the officials treated her as if she were a criminal suspect, instead of a small trader who tried to earn a living to support her family. Her suspicion was proven valid considering the fact that no Thai or foreign strangers hang out with them in the Kallang Riverside Park on Sunday afternoon. When I requested to join Ket on her overnight trip by air-con bus to Hat Yai in Southern Thailand, through Malaysia, she took a sarcastic shot at me and told me to prepare rolls of films and a good camera to take pictures of herself and her friends. I had to shrug off her remarks and happened to realize one of the ethnographic fieldwork truths, that the observers are constantly observed by their informants in the fields (Stocking, 1983). The natives or informants too are keen observers. However, my straight-forward approach was well accepted by most male workers, whom I can comfortably engage into conversation. They knew me as a teacher/researcher and gave me full cooperation. I also developed some good relationship and trust with many of them, who revealed their private life and took me along when they visited brothels in Geylang. Some even introduced me to their secret forest brothels and make-shift gambling dens hidden away from spotlights behind the hostels for foreign workers or in the corners of Singapore's tropical forest.

Being a Thai achan working in Singapore's top university is a privilege. My social identities in the field are inseparable from this privileged status. Thai workmen and women, whom I had contacted in the past three years, have recognized that facts that I am different from them in terms of job and social status in Singapore, but I am the person they can relate themselves with as a Thai countryman as well as an Isan-speaking person sharing common ethnocultural roots. The way that my Thai informants perceive my social identities in Singapore is very similar to what Keyes (1983) describes as the "observer observed" in his fieldwork experience in Mahasarakham in the early 1960s. He argues that the villagers defined his "farang" social identities based on their cultural understanding and day-to-day living experiences in the same village boundaries. My Thai informants in Singapore had observed my field roles and given their own definitions of who I am. They see me as their teacher, friend, and person who came from the same ethno-regional backgrounds.

Both headnotes and heartnotes have guided me into the conscious process of "constructing the field" (Amit, 2000) in Singapore. My fieldwork among Thai migrant workmen forced me to define and redefine Singapore as a fieldwork site. Despite its small and compact geographical setting, Singapore cannot be my field site per se. I have evaded Singapore as an ethnographic field beyond its cosmopolitan, global images.<sup>5</sup> My close relations with Thai

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<sup>5</sup> I owe Vineeta Sinha (Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore) for pointing out this point to me in our personal communication. She writes that "I do feel quite strongly that there has been an 'over-reading' and 'over-analysis' of Singapore as a highly urban space, where the world of official bureaucratic rationality, discipline and over-regulation are dominant frames. If one looks at the city outside these frames, a different world appears' and one which is more meaningful, either in enabling or obscuring the business of day-to-day living" (Personal Communication, October 15, 2005).

workmen have led me into social spaces, which are usually either hidden away or suppressed in the Singapore’s official and academic discourses. I was particularly excited by my two field trips into two forested areas in Lim Chu Kang and Chao Chu Kang. The first one was to join a team of local journalists to inspect the forest brothel near a hostel for foreign worker, which served as a camp-work station for Thai sex workers. I was stunned to witness how sex and gambling play their roles for the foreign workmen during their leisure time at night. The second trip was to accompany a group of Thai Isan workmen to go foraging and fishing in some abandoned fruit orchards and fish ponds. The workmen took their refuge in the forest to collect edible forest food (e.g., wild vegetable, fruit, and root) as well as to go fishing with poles and nets they bought from stores in the Golden Mile Complex. They can save some money on meals and enjoy their favorite wild food. They can also entertain themselves with some freedom, ungazed and unregulated by their employers and authorities. My perception of Singapore has forever changed with these trips to marginalized places, which are reconstructed and redefined by its migrant workers population.

My initial goals in cultivating headnotes and heartnotes as the flagships of my ethnographic investigation are two folds. First, they guided me to focus my attention on gathering situated lived stories concerning the workers’ migrant livelihood and subjectivity away from home. Beio (2005 : 317) argues that ‘story telling is a reflexive representational strategy.’ In addition, they are ‘lived narratives’ which ‘offer insights into the social fields people transverse in situations of mobility’ (Sorensen and Stepputat, 2001 : 314). Second, ethnographic stories I have gathered and reconstructed helped forming the “factual accounts” of Thai workmen, which feature them as key actors of labor transnationalism on the ground. Stories from the field vividly

show how men and women have struggled and survived their socially marginalized migrant lives in a strictly-monitored and controlled geo-political space like Singapore. In other words, my informants allowed me to feature their lived memories and experiences in my ethnographic writings as “persuasive fictions” (Atkinson, 1990 : 26). I take stories, which I retrieved and reconstructed from my headnotes, heartnotes, and other field information gathering tools to convince as well as “...persuade the reader of the facts [they] supports to describe and comment on” (Ibid. : 36).

Why do I wish to stress on the importance of a persuasive ethnography? To whom I wish to persuade through my ethnographic writing? And how can I know that my writing is persuasive enough? These are daunting questions, which I may or may not be able to answer. A persuasive ethnography refers to intensive and engaged intellectual efforts reflecting its author’s intimate knowledge and experience on the subject. It is an ethnography, which is delicately written with authority and confidence. It is an ethnography, which is produced through the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the lived texts with an aim to persuade its readers to capture certain angles of human experiences. I believe that human stories are very essential to make a persuasive ethnography. I need to weave together emotional lived stories, transient predicaments, and home-departing and homecoming complexities in order to build up coherent texts. All these elements are rather idealistic goals, which always start from the fact that I have to position myself properly in the field to observe and gather human stories that enhance my understanding of their world out there.

Many migrant stories I have gathered reflexively showed the masculine cultural discourses among displaced Thai migrants in Singapore. The workmen are strongly committed to their families. They eagerly remitted their

wages home (*song ngoen klap ban*) on regular basis. Sending money home to their beloved ones are among the proudest moments in these men's life, who have worked very hard as breadwinners for their families. Besides their breadwinning ideal, Thai workmen also demonstrated their masculine passion in sports, e.g., boxing, football (soccer), and sepak takraw. The young workmen from different companies and construction sites enthusiastically participated in the annual football tournament organized by the Office of Thai Labour Affairs. Football became masculine language and mode of social interaction among men, who enjoyed showing their sporty skills and heroic working class pride in their attempts to win some male honors for their teams and for themselves.

A more touching story involving how the Thai workmen maintain their cultural bonds with their original villages in Thailand is the Buddhist merit-making project commonly known as '*pha pa*.' Traditionally, *pha pa* is the ceremony to giving away yellow robe and other necessities as a form of merit-making to the monks and the Sangha. The transnational *pha pa* projects usually intend to raise funds for the village development projects like the construction of temple hall, school library, village road, and other infrastructure development projects. The *pha pa* is jointly organized by the home-village committee and the migrant representatives in Singapore. The envelopes containing the ceremony's details are distributed among workers, who wish to make some cash donations (e.g., 2 Singapore dollars or more). The donations are collected by the organizing committee and remitted back to the home-village counterpart as a form of Buddhist merit-making token from overseas workers. My informants estimated that there are more than 300 *pha pa* projects all year round and raised up to 300,000 SGD each year to help support community development projects in the Thai countryside. Ethnographic

accounts gathering through the abovementioned headnotes and heartnotes have demonstrated how the Thai workmen are engaged in their masculine discourses both within their fragmented community in the host country and across international borders back to their home villages. They are highly conscious of their own presence and absence as ‘labor-selling’ men (*khon khai raeng*), who are always committed themselves to invest economically and socially to their home villages for now and for their post-migrant future (see Pattana Kitiarsa, 2005b). However, I have realized that in order to represent them properly in the world of ethnography, one has to earn “the rights of ethnographic representation” through the engaged and committed works based on both the head and the heart. Human stories can be meaningfully captured through the fieldworker’s ethical and professional commitments.

Fieldnotes make ethnography. However, it requires efforts other than habitual jotting down one’s pad-notes and rewriting them into fieldwork accounts in order to produce ethnographies as “persuasive fictions” (Atkinson, 1990 : 26). Lessons from my fieldwork among Thai migrant workers in Singapore suggest the vital roles of headnotes and heartnotes as ethical and professional field role scripts for engaged ethnographers. Writing on the subjects of migrant livelihood and subjectivity, cannot be accomplished without series of committed observation, which cut deep into the textures of everyday life beyond the workmen’s stereotypical life in the public sphere. I have employed both headnotes and heartnotes to ensure myself that I have earned my academic rights to represent them in the world of ethnographic literature.

Finally, I wish to reiterate that ethnographic research is deeply embedded in complex human relationships, which demand some committed and engaged endeavors from the fieldworker through the works of headnote and heartnote. Both headnote and heartnote form a strong foundation for the



ethnographer to write persuasive ethnography filling with human sensibility. The human stories, which I had collected through the cultivation of the head and the heart, present some compelling angles of marginal and transient life of migrant workers in their transnational acts of border-crossing and of working and living away from home.

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