

# Translocality: Myanmar Migrant Workers' Religious Space-making in Ranong Province, Thailand<sup>1</sup>

Nattchawal Pocapanishwong

*Department of Social Science, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University,  
Ubon Ratchathani 34190, Thailand  
E-mail: attamasan@yahoo.com*

## Abstract

This article examines the relationship between Myanmar migrant workers' religious space-making and its local host community in Ranong, a province in southern Thailand on the Thai-Myanmar border. This study found that before the influx of the migrants, 'Burmeseness'<sup>2</sup> was not foreign to the local society, but has been gradually transformed into an object of alienation by Thai state policies. In recent years, the migrant workers' establishment of ties to the local community through religion - a symbolic space - has created an imaginary home for migrants, which is linked to the place of residence. Such linkages of multi-ethnic and multi-local consciousness among diverse groups of people across local and nation-state boundaries may be called 'the conjunction of (trans) localities' are transforming relationships among coexisting migrants and local people. The religious sphere has served as a cultural mediating agent between these diverse groups, reflecting hybridity and complexity of how localization and globalization are manifested in the borderland.

**Keywords:** Myanmar migrant workers, translocality, place-making, religious sphere, Ranong

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<sup>2</sup> The word *Burma* and *Myanmar* are used interchangeably in this article because both local people and Myanmar migrant workers in the area have defined and call people who have migrated from Myanmar as the "Burmese". Only when cultural practices are compared among ethnic groups in Myanmar the sub-terms such as Dawei, Burma, Mon, Rakhine, Karen, Kala, and Rohingya are used.

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างสังคมท้องถิ่นกับปฏิบัติการสร้างความหมายผ่านพื้นที่/ชุมชนทางศาสนาของแรงงานอพยพชาวเมียนมาร์ในจังหวัดระโนง หนึ่งในพื้นที่ชายแดนภาคใต้ของไทยซึ่งมีอาณาเขตติดต่อกับประเทศไทยเมียนมาร์ ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ก่อนหน้าการเคลื่อนย้ายเข้ามายังแรงงานอพยพ ‘ความเป็นพม่า’ (*Burmese*ness) มิใช่สิ่งใหม่ในสังคมท้องถิ่น หากแต่ค่อยๆ ถูกปรับเปลี่ยนความหมายไปเป็นสิ่งแฝงแยกด้วยเงื่อนไข การดำเนินนโยบายของรัฐไทย ขณะที่การสร้างความผูกพันต่อท้องถิ่นผ่านสัญลักษณ์ทางพื้นที่ศาสนาของแรงงานชาวเมียนมาร์ในยุคหลังช่วยให้บ้านในจินตนาการของผู้อพยพถูกเชื่อมต่อเข้ากับพื้นที่พักพิงอาศัย ไปจนถึงก่อให้เกิดการเชื่อมร้อยในเชิงสำนักงาน เชื้อชาติ/ชาติพันธุ์และสำนักความเป็นถิ่นที่ระหว่างผู้คนหลากหลายในแบบข้ามท้องถิ่น พร้อมแคนความเป็นชาติและรัฐ-ชาติ หรือในลักษณะที่อาจเรียกว่า ‘การบรรจบพบทกันของ (การเชื่อม/ข้าม) ถิ่นที่’ (*the conjunction of (trans) localities*) และนำมาซึ่งการปรับความสัมพันธ์ในการอยู่ร่วมระหว่างผู้อพยพกับคนท้องถิ่น พื้นที่ศาสนาจึงเป็นเสมือนสื่อกลางทางวัฒนธรรมระหว่างผู้คนหลากหลาย ซึ่งให้เห็นการประทับประทวนระหว่างท้องถิ่นกับกระบวนการการโลกกว้างในพื้นที่ชายแดนที่เป็นไปในลักษณะพลิกผัน (*hybridity*) และซับซ้อน

**คำสำคัญ:** แรงงานอพยพชาวเมียนมาร์ การข้ามถิ่นที่ การสร้างความหมายทางสถานที่ พื้นที่ทางศาสนา ระโนง

## Background

In the past decade the focus of research on migrant workers from neighboring countries done by Thai academics has shifted to issues on ethnic groups, displaced people/diaspora, within the context of globalization and transnationality (see Santasombat et al, 2008; Ruanmoon, 1997; Kanjanadith, 1997; Pawakapan and Baonoet, 2008; Tangseefa, 2004; Thongyou and Ayuwat, 2005; Grivijitr, 2006; Kerdmongkol, 2011; Khieochan, 2011; and Phongsiri, Thongyou and Apichatvullop, 2016). Nonetheless, the focus has been limited to mobility and transnational relations of migrants, without concern about the linkages with their host society and the mobility of past generations of migrants. As a result, migrants have been perceived as a group of

people divorced from their local host community. Although in the past several years, a few Thai academics have expanded the focus of their studies to cover the interaction between migrants and their host society and, in some aspects, the participation of migrants in local institutions through a religious movement (such as Rangkla, 2009 and Buadang et al., 2013). However, these studies are limited in their focus on the argument concerning state sovereignty and the emphasis on migrants' maintenance of their community identity. The concept of locality has been overshadowed and remains a secondary focus or merely pushed to the background.

In contrast, since the late 1990s, although western academics have become increasingly aware of the powerful force of globalization and time-space compression that resulted in actions at a transnational scale, they have also been aware of long-lasting transnational ties (Smart and Smart, 2003: 276-278). In addition, some academics suggest that transnational destabilization, due to globalization processes, not only leads to deterritorialization (Smith, 2011), but also a new geographic imagination such as different networks of society, culture, politics and economy among transnational migrants across national boundaries (Mitchell, 1997 in Brickell and Datta, 2011: 8-9). As a result, while migrants may remain transnationally connected but simultaneously settle and shape localities of settlement, construct the complex of affiliation and participate in local institutions and their social, economic, political and cultural processes (Salzbrunn, 2011: 168-169). "Transnational migrants were therefore never bereaved of locatedness; rather they were always socially and spatially situated actors rooting the transnational in the place-making practices of the translocal. These phenomena make a 'grounded' sense of transnationalism that needs to be reflexive (Brickell and Datta, 2011: 9)."

These academics' suggestions are in line with my field research in Ranong, a province in southern Thailand on the Thai-Myanmar border. Travels across the Thai-Myanmar border in the area have occurred regularly for at least a century. Intermarriage and familial ties across the border have been a normal occurrence, just like the existence

of Thais of Myanmar roots whose ancestors came to settle in the area nearly 100 years ago. Later batches of immigrants—migrant workers—have interestingly built ties to the local community, as seen in their involvement in the restoration of the Burmese-style stupa built by older generations of Myanmar roots, who inspired the tradition of building Burmese-style stupas in later years. However, the labor workers' attempt at social participation through the religious space has not been as well accepted by the locals as their previous generations of Myanmar immigrants were. This phenomenon provokes the following questions: How was the locality maintained before the arrival of the migrants? Has the locality changed ever since? If so, how? How has the migrants' act of building ties with the community in which they settled and their participation in local activities reflected social meaning and caused a dynamic change to the locality?

This study is based on qualitative research with an anthropological methodology using in-depth interviews in both formal and informal settings. The data were from narratives, oral history, life history, as well as participatory observation in the field. Main sources of information were local people and migrant workers from Myanmar in Ranong province. Additionally, archival research was conducted with an examination of documents recorded or created by local people. This field research was conducted between July 2010 and May 2012.

### **Ranong: town of Chinese descendants and the maintenance of diverse races/ethnicities**

Ranong province is located on the Andaman coast, 568 kilometers away from the Thai capital of Bangkok. The province is 3,298.045 square kilometers and divided into 5 administrative districts: Muang Ranong, Kraburi, Kaper, La-oon, and Suksamran districts. The province shares both land and marine borders with Myanmar, totaling more than 160 kilometers (Office of Ranong Province, 2014),<sup>3</sup> resulting in the ease of

<sup>3</sup> Muang Ranong district is only 5 kilometers away from Koh Song district, or Victoria Point, in Myanmar. Kraburi district and Maliwun subdistrict in Myanmar are separated only by Kraburi

cross-border movements. Ranong province has seen the arrival of people from Myanmar and other places for a long time, as evident in the diverse composition of multiple nationalities/ethnicities and languages among the various settlements throughout the history of Ranong town. At first, small groups of Thai people migrated from Chumphon and Langsuan, the district of Chumphon province. Then, approximately 150 years ago, Hokkien Chinese immigrants arrived who were led by “Ko Su Chiang,” the origin of Na-Ranong family line. He led the growth of Ranong’s economy, which relied on tin mining and became appointed the second governor of Ranong town. Hence, people of Hokkien Chinese descent became commonly known by most people as the first generation settlers<sup>4</sup>, in addition to a few settlements of the Hakka Chinese and the Gwangdong Chinese (Ranong Province, 1959; Damrong-rachanupap, 1968; Na-Ranong, 2003).

“My father was Chinese. He left China to settle in Takua Pa (around 1917 when Kho Yu Ngoi, son of Ko Su Chiang, ruled as the 5<sup>th</sup> Ranong governor). The governor was very smart. He brought the Chinese to Ranong by a green-coated sail boat. It took them about a month to arrive in the province. At first, my father was sent to a mine in Ta Kua Pa, but there was a labor shortage in Ranong, so the governor brought in the Chinese; they were easy to control, you know? He promoted hard-working ones to higher, leading positions.” (Pae Sia [Pseudonym], 2011)

Between the time Myanmar became a British colony and the 1960s, Ranong saw the arrival of people of Myanmar descent from

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River, which is less than 100 meters in width at its narrowest point.

<sup>4</sup> Although historical documents establish that Thai migrants were the first group of settlers in the late Ayutthaya era and Luang Ranong was the first Thai governor, the influx of Hokkien Chinese descent into the mining industry pushed Ranong to become an important trade frontier for the Thai court. In 1862, Ranong was raised to the status of fourth-tier city, from previously a tributary of Chumphon. Descendents of Na-Ranong family continued to rule Ranong for several generations. People of Hokkien Chinese descent are thus perceived as founders of Ranong and form the main component of the entire local population. Especially, in 2000 business entrepreneurs of Chinese descent in collaboration with various government agencies in the province jointly built the Ko Su Chiang Monument as a place of worship for local people.

Myeik and Dawei, who settled in small communities in the neighborhoods known as *Talat phama* [Myanmar market], the *Rong kluang* metal refinery and *Tha dan* border crossing pier. People of Myanmar descent mostly worked in timber and Nypa palm production industry as their household businesses.

“My father was born in Dawei, my mother, Myeik. My maternal grandfather was a goldsmith from Burma. His name was U Chae. My granadmother’s name was Yai Chuai. My grandfather had 4 children: 2 daughters and 2 sons. He brought the entire family with him. He came to work in Ranong, owning a sawmill in the “Burmese Market” neighborhood by Thawee pier. The saws used back then were long, hand-held ones with two workers pulling on either ends, not machine-operated ones. In those days Burmese people were very good at lumber milling... There were not very many of them. Everybody knew each other. At first they lived in the Burmese Market area. It then got crowded with no more room to expand. Just then a smelting plant called Rong Kluang became vacant because the owner discontinued the business. So, many of the Burmese moved there. For a living, most of them did lumber milling, harvesting nipa palm leaves, and weaving them.” (Uncle Chi [Pseudonym], 2011)

In addition, people of Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim descent from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Myanmar also arrived in Ranong during the British colonial rule up until World War II. Most settled in the neighborhoods known as *Talat kaek* [Indian market], Bang Rin subdistrict and Ngao subdistrict. In the past, they worked in livestock farming, vegetable farming, fabric trading and different types of labor jobs on dredge boats (e.g., security guards, machinery operators, and mailmen). People from mainland China of Hainan descent arrived mostly during World War I and World War II, with a number of relatives settling in Koh Song. From 1970s to 1990s, immigrants of Teochew Chinese descent arrived from central, eastern and upper

southern Thailand to pursue commercial fishing businesses, other industries related to fishing, and cross-border trading. During this same period of time, Thais from southern and northeastern Thailand migrated to Ranong and began to claim ownership of land in post-concession mining areas and in national parks in Muang Ranong and La-oon districts. Most worked as laborers in mining, on fishing boats, on coffee plantations, or as merchants (Grandmother Phikun [Pseudonym], 2011).

In such a place of great ethnic diversity, the study found that people of Chinese descent and many other groups coexisted in harmony. Most notably, 'Burmeseness' used to be perceived as an integral part of the local society, as evident in many narratives about complementary coexistence between people of Chinese and Myanmar descent in various cultural traditions, such as funeral customs, Thai/Myanmar New Year (Songkran) traditions, stories of close familial ties between past rulers of Ranong and people of Myanmar descent.

"Carrying coffins (in a funeral procession) for the Club was a Chinese thing, but any close friends could do that, too. I still remember it. A woman would have a picture of an egret on her coffin. A man, a lion. Look! The beam was this big, but it was so heavy. They usually used champak or iron wood to make coffins by themselves. The Burmese carried coffins, too. But they used bamboo. They had little money, but they were caring towards one another. They would just go to a sawmill and asked for help in making a coffin. By noon, they would just say, "Hey, that's it. Just go and get food on your own. No lunch treat." Then someone would start pitching in 20 baht, and then the rest of them would follow suit. Soon they would raise enough money to buy rice or chili dip, enough to make a meal for everyone. The Na-Ranong family also joined them. One the day of the funeral procession, they would just poke fun at one another while carrying the coffin. They would be pushing, pulling, tugging back and forth, making funny sounds like those people in the North did in their monk ordination procession

when they would throw, lift, and gather around the monk-to-be. In our funeral procession we would do the same...In those days the Chinese had their own way of doing it, and we Burmese had ours. But we did join one another out of respect." (Uncle Cho [Pseudonym], 2011)

As well as the construction of '**Dathu Chedi**', a stupa based on the Myanmar artistic style, located in a Thai temple under the patronage of Ranong's governor of Chinese descent. Other traditions include the regular ordination of Myanmar monks in Thai Buddhist temples, the intermarriage of people with Chinese and Myanmar descent resulting in half-Chinese half-Myanmar children known among native residents as "Baba-Burma". Furthermore, there were also familial ties between residents of Ranong and Koh Song with Chinese descent. This is because Koh Song, Maliwun, Bokpyin and Myeik used to be part of the Siam territory. (This is based on interviews with several locals.)

In 1868, national borders were redefined during the British colonial rule. Those areas became part of Myanmar, and local people in these areas were also known as "Khon-koh-song" (Koh Song people) and "Khon-fai-plang" (Plang people), meaning *people under the rule of Westerners*. However, the close ties between people along both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border continued in many aspects. As we can see, people travelled across the border for trade, medical care in Koh Song's hospital, and sent their children to study in Chinese schools in Koh Song and Myeik because during that time the Myanmar side of the border was more modern than Ranong town. In addition, Myanmar monks regularly ordained in Thai Buddhist temples, and Thai Buddhist monks sent representatives to Myanmar under the Diplomatic Buddhism Project. (This is based on interviews with several locals.)

After Myanmar gained independence in 1948 and after World War II, the Thai government under the rule of Field Marshall Phibunsongkram began implementing nationalist policies in mid 1950s (Phongsiri and Thongyou, 2013). Religious spaces and artifacts once dominated by the Myanmar artistic style were replaced by Thai art.

Myanmar monks were driven out of Thai temples by means of instituting Thai monks and giving them more powers (Abbot of the Bo Namphu Temple [Pseudonym], 2011; Wittaya [Pseudonym], 2011; Uncle Cho, [Pseudonym], 2011). This in turn reduced 'Burmeseness' from the local communities, not to mention the assimilation of people with Myanmar descent to adopt 'Thainess' under the policy of granting Thai nationality and the recruiting of police and military officials (Uncle Chi [Pseudonym], 2011).

In addition, the spread of communism in the Indochina region and the regime change in Myanmar to military dictatorship in 1962 caused Thailand to implement citizenship control measures through the enforcement of national identification cards and rigorous border control activity (Thepchana, 1966). As a result, people of Myanmar descent gradually lost touch with relatives on the Myanmar side of the border. At the same time, 'Koh Song people' and 'Plang People', who used to live on both sides of the border, transformed their status into people with dual nationality or commonly known as 'Khon-song-nam' (meaning people live in both side of borders) to ensure a fluid way of life in Thailand and Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> Although these people's dual nationality was not recognized by the Thai state, the existence of 'Khon-song-nam' was widely known and accepted as a common practice among the locals to the point that more than half of all native residents in Ranong of Chinese descent had some family ties to 'Khon-song-nam'. (This is based on interviews with several locals.)

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<sup>5</sup> However, some people in that area chose to settle on the Myanmar side of the border and adopted the Myanmar nationality, while others chose to migrate back to the Thai side of the border, becoming a part of "stateless" people in Thailand today. Some of them are '*Thai diaspora*', see more detail in Phongsiri and Thongyou (2013) and Phongsiri, Thongyou and Apichatvullop (2016).

## Recent influx of Myanmar migrant workers and ‘Burmeseness’ in the local society

The beginning of commercial fishing pioneered by people of Teochew Chinese descent in the late 1960s led to the rapid growth of the fishing industry and related business in Ranong and the quick rise in demand for workers from neighboring countries to replace the workers from northeastern Thailand, who either moved back to their homes or travelled abroad for work (this is based on interviews with several locals.). During the regime change in Myanmar to military dictatorship in the early 1960s, political conflicts forced many Myanmar citizens to live in dire poverty when the country was ranked in the top ten most impoverished societies in the world (Jirattikorn, 1998: 57-58). Myanmar citizens began migrating to neighboring countries, particularly Thailand, to escape warfare and economic hardships.

In August 1988, the Myanmar government used violent force against students and citizens in an event widely known as the 8/8/88 Incident. It was the same period of time that the Thai government under the administration of Prime Minister Chatchai Chunhawan (1988-1991), implemented the national policy aiming to “Change Battlefields into Fields of Commerce.” (Boonmaklee, 1997; Jirattikorn, 1998; Kasetsiri, 2000) Thailand witnessed an influx of Myanmar migrant workers, followed by the arrival of their family members. Eventually, many became undocumented residents of Ranong province. It is estimated that currently there are approximately 100,000 to 200,000 legal and illegal Myanmar migrant workers in Ranong province, while the Thai population of Ranong is only 183,079 (National Statistical Office, 2014).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> These are figures from <http://service.nso.go.th/nso/nsopublish/districtList/S010107/th/72.htm>. According to Department of Employment statistics as of February 2013, there are 40,448 legal and illegal alien workers in Ranong province (excluding workers according to Article 12 of the Investment Promotion Act (BOI-Board of Investment) and general workers). This number excludes family members and accompanying children and elderly people since alien worker registration at the time excluded accompanying family members. (Office of Foreign Workers Administration, 2013)

Most migrant workers are ethnic Burmese from Dawei and Myeik, ethnic Mon from Mawlamyine, Pa-an and Irrawaddy, and ethnic Rakhine from Rakhine state. Most are Buddhists. Some of the Kalaw or Indian people are Hindus, while Karen and Tai-Yai ethnic groups, which are small in number, are either Buddhists or Christians. Furthermore, Muslim Rohingya, from the Rakhine state, tend to live in communities separate from other Myanmar migrants. Migrant workers mostly work as laborers in fishing boats, fishing docks, shipyards, fishmeal factories, freezer storage factories, rubber plantations, palm plantations, or as construction workers, workers in stores and restaurants, and housemaids. Some do self-employed work such as small trade, tailoring, hairdressing, teaching, fortunetelling, and independent contract work. (This is based on observation and interviews with Burmese migrant workers in the area.)

According to local people, recent arrivals of Myanmar migrants started during the regime change in Myanmar to military dictatorship. In addition, these migrants are not of Chinese-Myanmar descent or 'Baba-Burma', not local people based in Koh Song, and thus live in context which is different from people from Myanmar in the past. This recent phenomenon also occurred at a time when there was some level of hostility between Thailand and Myanmar, and between Ranong and Koh Song. Recent migrants are perceived as a lowly group of people in terms of ethnicity, history and culture. Current Myanmar migrants are commonly perceived to be "poor, uncivilized, backward, and undeveloped laborers" as opposed to the first settlements of people of Myanmar descent who arrived and perceived as "noblemen" and "genteel". The early people of Chinese descent were also perceived as "educated" people who arrived to "build a fortune", while current Myanmar migrant workers are perceived as unskilled workers coming to sell their cheap labor. Still today, people of Chinese descent are the economic, social, and political elite in the local society. (This is based on interviews with several locals.)

In addition, the Myanmar government's policy to shut down the country caused Koh Song to lose its status as the leader in modern

services compared to Ranong. Koh Song became impoverished and backward in many ways, and ‘Burmeseness’, which used to coexist harmoniously in the local society slowly deteriorate in its social and cultural value. In the late 1960s, when migrants from northern Myanmar arrived in Ranong province to work as unskilled laborers, ‘Burmeseness’ became perceived as an inferior race/ethnicity by locals in the society.

“In the past Burmese people conducted themselves in a humble manner, living their lives in peace. They were well-respected Burmese. In those days we knew they were Burmese, but we didn’t discriminate against them. They conducted themselves well. They got along well with Thai people and understood things pretty well. The town was small. There were not many people. Everybody knew each other. They were different from Burmese people today. You don’t know if they’re good or bad. These days they come here because the country is under a dictatorship. They come here because of hunger and poverty. Many of them have come, to the point that we know nothing about their backgrounds.” (Wittaya [Pseudonym], 2011)

“In recent years it has become more like the Indian caste system in which the Burmese are seen as second-class people because they are either real Burmese or Mon-Burmese who come to take labor jobs, not rich people like in the past. These are a different group. Old groups were the “Baba”, who still come to get married in Thailand or own businesses here. Old groups are of Chinese descent and mostly rich... The difference became clear during changes in Burma. After the people’s lives became difficult in poor economic conditions under the military regime, they were oppressed, so they’ve decided to come here to do labor work (Chit [Pseudonym], 2011).

For this reason, some people in the new generations of Myanmar descent in local communities began to distance themselves from their own roots by changing last names and assimilating into ‘Thainess’

completely. People of “Baba-Burma” of Chinese-Myanmar descent also came to attribute themselves to the Chinese identity and avoided acknowledging their Myanmar roots. The image of ‘Khon-song-nam’ or people of dual nationality became tainted by inferior race/ethnicity. “Now we call them “Khon-song-nam”, but they try to claim they are “Khon Thai” [Thai people]. The thing is that these two words belong to different classes. Being “Khon-song-nam” is being Burmese, the “lower class”, but being “Thai” is the “higher class”. In an intermarriage context, they will call themselves “Khon chin” [Chinese] because Chinese Burmese are well accepted. All of them own businesses and have a good reputation (Chit [Pseudonym], 2011); Nowadays “Khon-song-nam” do not want to talk about themselves because the Burmese are viewed as another class. Right now they’ve all become “Chinese Burmese”, no more “Baba” like in the past. They feel ashamed of being Burmese because Burmese people now are laborers (Sister Tiw [Pseudonym], 2011).

This is because most new generations of ‘Khon-song-nam’ result from intermarriage between people of Chinese, Myanmar or mixed Chinese and Myanmar descent are often questioned about their loyalty to the Thai state. This is reflected in the derogatory term “fish of two waters – dog of two troughs”.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, over the past decade, ‘Khon-song-nam’ has played a role in supporting the ever-increasing religious activities among Myanmar migrant workers, making ‘Burmeseness’ once again a hot issue for debate and criticism among local people in recent years.

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<sup>7</sup> Most of ‘Khon-song-nam’ hold such an important economic and social status, such as teachers, doctors, nurses, monks, businessmen, and political officials. More than 80 percent of the fishing industry and cross-border trade, the two most important business sectors in the area, also are in the hands of ‘Khon-song-nam’. As a result, some local people are beginning to worry that they will be engulfed or overshadowed economically, socially and politically. Further discussion in Pocapanishwong, N. *Translocality: The Interaction of Peoples in Borderland and the Negotiation in Religious Sphere of the Transnational Burmese Migrant Workers in Ranong Province*. (in Thai) (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Thammasat University, Bangkok. (2014). Thammasat University. (2014). pp.174-194.

## **‘Burmeseness’ given new meaning through the restoration and celebration of ‘Dathu Chedi’**

As discussed by Theerawat et al., (2008: 79-81), a strong belief in Buddhist faith has been deeply rooted in the Burmese society for nearly a hundred years. This is evinced in hundreds of temples, stupas, and important Buddhist establishments all over the country. This is a result of people’s merit-making with the hope to have a better life in the next world. It can be said that merit making is a crucial element to Burmese people’s lives just like their breaths. Specifically, building a stupa is the supreme act of merit-making. Likewise, local Burmese laborers often say, “Making merit with a stupa is the best. The construction stands strong, not falling. (Making merit with) some monks is good. Some...you just can’t criticize them. But a stupa is strong and firm. No one can take it. Nor can anyone steal it. The merit is greater (U Win [Pseudonym], 2010).

In a place other than home, the Chedi is a “symbol of home” to these immigrants. One informant said, “We moved here, which is not our home. We wanted to pay respect to a Buddha image and wanted to pray. We Burmese have to have a stupa wherever we go. So, we wanted to build one where we live, and we wanted to build one here (Ko Ong [Pseudonym], 2011); “We don’t know where and when we’ll die, when or whether we’ll return home. That’s why we said it would be here, where we live now, where we would build a stupa before we die—a place with an opportunity to do it, to build it before we die (U Su [Pseudonym], 2011).

The Chedi is a reminder to younger generations of their roots and tradition. It also serves as proof of their existence, as one informant put it, “We built the Chedi to show our respect, to show to our children that their parents built it, to let them know about our religion, and how to make merit and pay respect to Lord Buddha,... to show to children here or the ones coming to Thailand later that their parents led their lives this way and did this...In case we don’t get to go back to Burma, our children can still see it here” (Ko Ao [Pseudonym], 2010). However, in

the early period, most laborers held an illegal status. They struggled to make ends meet. Coupled with this, the Thai state's policy did not encourage expression and social gathering of immigrants. Building the Chedi or holding religious events was not easy. Thus, connecting with the local community by stepping up to restore the "Dathu Chedi", the Myanmar-style stupa built by a local with Burmese descent thus was an early attempt, which led to the Chedi celebrations in years to come.<sup>8</sup>

'Dathu Chedi' is a stupa based in the Myanmar artistic style. It was built in 1912 under support by Ma Si Kai (her descendants ordered the inscription of the year of construction and name of the sponsor at the base of the the Chedi), a wealthy woman of Myanmar descent. It is said that Ma Si Kai's husband originally served as an astrologer in the royal court of Myanmar. When the British colonial authority took over the rule of Myanmar and eliminated the royal system, Ma Si Kai's family moved to Ranong and settled there (this is based on interviews with several locals of Myanmar descent.). Dathu Chedi is located in Saphan Yung Temple (pseudonym), which was built in 1890, according to the decree of King Rama V after his royal visit to Ranong. The temple was built by Phraya Damrong Sujarit Mahisornpakdee (Ko Sim Kong Na-Ranong), Ranong's third governor and son of Ko Su Chiang. In the past, all local religious buildings and artifacts in the temple – such as the main Buddha statue, the ceremonial hall, the sermon hall, monks' living quarters – were all in the Myanmar artistic style because they were built by Myanmar artisans (Royal Gazette, 1895; Department of Religious Affairs, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> After the Chedi was restored, construction of new Burmese-style stupas in Thai temples, establishments, and items has become a widespread trend in the past 10 years. However, in its early days, such attempt did not take place quite smoothly because creating Burmese-style religious establishments and items was seen as a creation of the Burmese spatial symbol and identity, which could lead to a formation of a group for power negotiation and cultural assimilation. Thus, this was frowned upon by members of the local community and state security agencies. As a result, some stupas were destroyed while some were modified with a mix of the Thai and Burmese style. Also, there was an attempt by the locals to take part in the construction of temples. Likewise, early religious participation of Burmese people in merit-making ceremonies and large-scale sermon-preaching events, was regarded as a threat to national security. This in turn led to a ban on those events, arrests of migrant workers, and frequent extortions by state authorities (interested readers should refer to the author's dissertation for further details).

Until the late 1980s, during the migration of Myanmar migrant workers, the original ceremonial hall and monks' quarters of Saphan Yung Temple had been dismantled by the new generations of Na-Ranong family because they did not want 'the Burma (Myanmar) identity' in a Thai temple, which has essentially become something close to their family's temple. A new ceremonial hall was built after the Thai artistic style (Abbot of Bo Namphu, [Pseudonym], 2011; Abbot of Saphan Yung [Pseudonym], 2011). Today, only the main Buddha statue, the sermon hall and the stupa still have the Myanmar artistic style. In 2000, the stupa, Dathu Chedi, was officially recognized as a historical monument (Royal Gazette, 2001). Saphan Yung Temple is now perceived as the official temple of Ranong province and the Ranong's ruling family, because it was built by descendants of the former rulers of Ranong. It is the oldest temple in the province, and is the only temple under royal patronage in the province.<sup>9</sup>

During the period in which 'Burmeseness' was shunned by the society, local people with Myanmar roots also grew old and eventually passed away, while their children assimilated fully into 'Thainess'. Dathu Chedi thus held a less important role in daily life of local people of Myanmar descent and was abandoned without any caretakers for a long time. According to many informants, in 2000 a Myanmar migrant worker named Ou Su Mo dreamed of a stupa with the Myanmar artistic style. In his dream, he was told to come to take care of this stupa. This man surveyed various temples in downtown Ranong until he found this stupa at Saphan Yung Temple, which resembled the stupa that appeared in his dream. He asked permission from the temple abbot who was "Khon-song-nam," to clean the stupa with the help of Ko Thu, his Myanmar friend, who was relatively well-off. Since then, Ko Thu

<sup>9</sup> "Dathu Chedi" is one of two stupas in Ranong town built by former dignitaries in the Burmese court in the same time period. The other stupa is located in Tha Muang Temple (pseudonym), formerly a place of ordination for Myanmar monks. However, nationalist policies during the administration of Field Marshall P. Pibulsongkram resulted in Myanmar monks being pushed out of these places. Tha Muang Temple's ceremonial hall was redesigned, and the swan pole atop the stupa which represented Myanmar identity was removed. In addition, it is said that the original Buddha statue in Tha Muang Temple was of the Myanmar artistic style, but the Buddha statue has been altered. (This is based on interviews with several locals and research on historical documents. Interested readers should refer to the author's dissertation.)

recruited more people to join the restoration of the stupa. Some Myanmar-style religious artifacts were added, such as the addition of concave areas for Buddha images for the seven days of the week, the swan pillars, and the replacement of the *chatra* atop the stupa. Donations came from Myanmar migrant workers in the local area, including the patronage by 'Khon-song-nam' businessmen.

"At first I was working on a fish-farming raft. There was this friend who was already living in Ranong...He told me in town there was a Thai temple with a Burmese stupa. He said it was old. First he had had a dream about it, and then he looked and finally found it at that temple...He told me to take a look and see if I was interested in restoring it. So I went there over the weekend. What I saw was this all black Chedi covered in weeds. I couldn't see the Chedi itself because it was all black. But the top was visible. I could tell it was a Burmese stupa just by its top. Then no one came to pay respect. No one was interested...So I asked the abbot's permission to clean and repair parts of it. He said it was okay. So, then we slowly worked on it with help from each other to make merit doing this. We got a bit of money to fix it here and there, part by part, until we changed the *Chatra* atop the stupa." (Ko Thu [Pseudonym], 2011).

The celebration ceremony of the *chatra* was held in early 2003, and became the first time in Ranong province that a large-scale religious activity by Myanmar migrant workers was held in a Thai temple.<sup>10</sup> After the ceremony, a number of local people – including descendants of the Na-Ranong family, local people of Chinese descent, local people of Myanmar descent, who are local intellectuals and businessmen – started hosting cultural events to promote tourism in Ranong. This led to the "Dathu Chedi annual celebration," held on the Buddhist holiday of Wisakha Bucha, beginning in 2003.<sup>11</sup> The event adopted a tradition

<sup>10</sup> The influx of Myanmar migrant workers occurred during the discourse of national security and "alien workers" popularized in the past several decades, resulting in the denial of rights to gather and other rights among migrants. The religious space has appeared to be the only place to allow migrants have a regular and open role in public or social activities.

<sup>11</sup> The term "Phra Chedi Dathu" is a new name used during the celebration of the stupa. Originally, this stupa has no formal name. In the Burmese language, this name means "the stupa which contains the Buddha's holy relic."

from Nakorn Sri Thammarat province of wrapping blessed cloth around the stupa, the most famous and oldest historical site in southern Thailand. Myanmar migrant workers who formed the “Dathu Chedi Group” were allowed to participate in the parade and joined a procession carrying robe to wrap around the stupa, alongside local people, with from ‘Khon-song-nam’ as major sponsors.

In the first few years, the event was small and simple. Thai monks and Myanmar monks were invited to an alms-giving ceremony to receive donated fresh foods and dry goods. The attendees formed a procession carrying the stupa robe along town streets leading to the temple and together they wrapped the stupa with the blessed robe. This activity was joined by younger generations of people of Myanmar roots. In years that followed, state agencies and local administrative organizations became sponsors of the event. The organizers created a slogan called “Bridging Thai-Myanmar Relations” to promote cultural tourism and the positive relationships between local Thai and Myanmar people. The event received media coverage on television and in newspapers. Festivities were extended from 1 to 3 days, and included more diverse activities including the integration of Myanmar cultural performances. For example, Myanmar people were dressed in national costumes in the procession, and a traditional Myanmar dance troupe was brought in from Koh Song to perform at night, with financial support from businessmen who are ‘Khon-song-nam’. The event was advertised widely and well-attended by Myanmar migrant workers in the area.

In 2005, the organization of Dathu Chedi celebration was taken over by government agencies and local governments, most notably the Provincial Government Administration, Ranong City Municipality, the Provincial Office of Culture, and the Provincial Office of Buddhism. Since then, the provincial governor of Ranong has presided over the event, and it has become recognized as a “provincial ceremony,” with regular budget support of several hundred thousand baht each year. The event has grown to be more grand and with more ceremonies. For example, a large number of people are recruited to take part in the parade, including the nighttime performances on two stages divided into the

Thai stage and the Myanmar stage. The Thai stage displays cultural performances and various contests displaying children's talents. The Myanmar stage displays singers hired from Myanmar. Financial support comes from fundraising by members of the Dathu Chedi Group, collecting entrance fees for performances, as well as financial support from businessmen who are 'Khon-song-nam'.

The event has been expanded into a large-scale ceremony with widespread advertisement, resulting in increased participation of Myanmar people both from Ranong and Koh Song, numbering thousands in recent years. At the event, three worship tables are set up for the figures who have played significant roles to Saphan Yung Temple: King Rama V, who ordered the construction of this temple; Ranong's former governor Phraya Damrong Sujarit Mahisornpakdee, who constructed the temple; and Ma Si Kai, local Myanmar native, who ordered the construction of the stupa. This is the first time that the history of the stupa's construction has been officially recognized.

At the time some local people have protested that such activities celebrated Myanmar people and 'Burmeseness' too much. However, the provincial governor's policy emphasized ethnic/cultural diversity and promotion of harmonious coexistence between local people and migrants. Dathu Chedi Celebration and various cultural activities have been viewed as one mechanism to promote positive perception and good relations. Nonetheless, the growth of religious networks set up by migrant workers, which have taken up open roles in organizing large-scale religious events in recent years, have led to criticism by some local people. In addition, since the change in leadership in provincial government and the national security agency, such events have been viewed as a threat to national security and an attempt at cultural hegemony and social assimilation. (This is based on interviews with several Thai and Burmese residents in the community.)

In early 2011, when the author's field research was in progress, a Myanmar sermon to be held at Saphan Yung Temple was cancelled by national security authorities. Dathu Chedi Celebration was under government surveillance and almost the entire budget was cut. There

was an order prohibiting the display of any identity of Myanmar people. As a result, the event was cut down to only one day, and the slogan of “Bridging Thai-Myanmar Relations” as used in previous years was removed. No cultural activities were performed by migrants, and migrants could not participate in the procession. There were only Thai people and a few leaders of Myanmar migrant workers in the ceremony of wrapping the stupa. ‘Khon-song-nam’ distanced themselves from the event because their support for such event for Myanmar migrant workers and their “grey business” led them to be under state surveillance as well as a growing scrutiny by locals over their loyalty.

“The thing is “Khon-song-nam” used to live in Burma. It’s their “ethnicity” and their “locality”. They used to be there. Now they might think that recent immigrants, who are laborers, also come from the same country, right? That’s why they’re kind towards these people. Yes, they’re their employees, but they take care of these people. When the people are sick, they take good care of them...They still think that their “identity” is “of Burmese descent”. Some of them still speak Burmese. They can communicate among themselves...They’re connected by different activities. They still join Burmese monk ordination ceremonies and other Burmese social functions despite the fact they have crossed over to Thailand and now live here. They join the Chedi celebration at Saphan Yung Temple, showing off their “identity” by offering foods at the event...Those who join the event are from different statuses. There are people from higher and lower statuses...But they don’t want to show their “identity” as “Burmese” to Thai people. It’s still awkward because some people do not accept that (Chit [Pseudonym], 2011).

Conservative and nationalist sentiments among local people demonstrate their belief that Myanmar migrants participate in Thai temple activities and the Datu Chedi Celebration as a “historical guise” in order to praise their own ethnic/cultural identity and “invade” the

locals' symbolic space. The temple abbot, who is "a Khon-song-nam," is often questioned about his loyalty and is mocked as a "Thai Monk with a Myanmar heart." Consequently, some local people are attempting to revise the history of Dathu Chedi, saying that the stupa was constructed and funded entirely by Ranong's former ruler, and only hired Myanmar artisans for the construction. This opposition has led the temple abbot and some 'Khon-song-nam' to initiate a plan to construct a "Thai stupa" next to Dathu Chedi. Local people are invited to participate in the support the project expressed his opinion that revising the history of Dathu Chedi is not possible, because many people view it as a sensitive religious issue. Thus the construction of a new Thai-style stupa is a more appropriate solution for every party involved.<sup>12</sup>

"At the time Ranong lacked masons who could build a chedi or chapel, so they brought in Myanmar masons. So, the style was Burmese. Then the locals of Myammar descent claimed that their families built the places. In reality, it was true they built them, but the constructions were financed by a Ranong governor. The history has not been recognized...because there's some concern over the fact they we practice the same religion... Now that there are many Burmese here, so they "opportunistically claimed" that the temple was built by Burmese people. The Burmese then have been giving the temple so much support that they stand out as a thorn in the current abbot's flesh because he too is a "Khon-song-nam". ..They turn festivals into entirely Burmese celebrations...with cloth wrapping. First we Thais did it, and then them Burmese had a procession and wrapping, too... That's why the abbot has this idea of building a Thai stupa, making it bigger than the Burmese one...You know we can't

<sup>12</sup> This stupa underwent the official ceremony to bless its foundation on December 16, 2013. It received the name "Phra Dhamma That Chedi Sri Ranong." The stupa, adapted from the Sri Wichai era artistic style, is approximately 3-4 times larger than the Dathu Chedi. The total budget for the construction was over 20 million baht. At the beginning of January 2016, the construction is nearly complete and the Chatra Celebration Ceremony is expected to take place in the same year.

go back in time to change things. So, we need to build a bigger stupa... making it completely Thai. (Uncle Sut [Pseudonym], 2011)

### **Religious space-making of Myanmar migrant workers and ‘the conjunction of (trans) localities’**

The phenomenon of ‘Burmeseness’ has come to receive new meaning through the celebration of Dathu Chedi which reflects how Myanmar migrant workers have created a religious space. This phenomenon has resulted in a translocal process and a restructuring of the relationship among coexisting migrants and local people in many dimensions.

#### **Place of symbol**

It can be said that ‘Burmeseness,’ given new meaning through the place of symbol, enables migrants to maintain continuity of their imaginary home across time and space, as well as to establish themselves as an integral part of the local community where they now live. As can be seen, the migrants treat the Chedi as if it were “a symbol of home”, which they left behind. “Burmeseness” in “Dathu Chedi” refers them back to their racial/ethnic homeland, helping them to connect their imaginary homes in Burma to their actual shelter in Thailand, as one informant put it, “When we first saw it, we knew it was a Burmese stupa. So, we were very happy. I had thought that there must have been children of the Burmese working here. Once we found the Chedi, we thought the builders were like family. We have family here...Having the Chedi here is heart-warming. This is like our home. Having the Chedi is like seeing our home in Burma. We Burmese have to have a stupa with us wherever we go.” (Ko Thu [Pseudonym], 2011); “The Burmese stupa here is like the one in Burma. When our children from Burma come to visit, we bring them to pay respect to this one. Even though we didn’t build it, it was our fellow Burmese here who built it. We Burmese respect it. We take our visiting children here to pay respect to it, to let them see the Burmese stupa here, just like the ones at home.” (U Chuai [Pseudonym], 2010).

In this sense, the Burmese migrants' restoration of the Dathu Chedi is part of the process of creating and maintaining their imaginary home, which they have no opportunity to visit, for their children who may live here. The migrants' home thus exists over time and space. The migrants' domestic homes connect their past, present, and imagined or future homelands; in a way such connection is "a relationally linked range of localities" (Jacobs 2004: 167). According to Hatfield (2011: 55-70), repatriated British migrants who used to live in Singapore attempt to maintain their imaginary home through the practice of homemaking, such as importing and arranging their mementos such as photographs, Buddha images and decorating their gardens. This process helps to make their UK homes become both a symbol and imagination attached to temporary homes in which they lived in Singapore live. However, moving UK homes to Singapore is impossible. The arrangement of household items thus brings an illusion of continuity over time and space.

At the societal level, "home" is also a process of creating a space of belonging and identity (Brickell & Datta, 2011: 13). As found in this study, the creation of meaning through a symbolic religious space has enabled migrants to integrate themselves as a well-accepted part of the local society and have their own social space. The long history of Dathu Chedi is a confirmation that 'Burmese' is not new or foreign to the local society, but instead a part of a longstanding tradition of harmonious coexistence for hundreds of years. This evidence enables migrants to link themselves to the local society through common national/ethnic roots with previous generations of people of Myanmar descent. A leader of the Dathu Chedi Group has said in the interview that knowing about the real history of Dathu Chedi has made them become aware of themselves as members of the local populace, as well as awareness in the coexistence without discrimination against national/ethnic differences.

"It's as if we already have relatives here. We're no longer the new guys. Myanmar people have lived here for a long time. This is our country, too. ... Knowing this makes us feel

no different... You cannot separate us now, because we've lived here for a long time. We have a history here. We have to love each other." (Ko Thu[Pseudonym], 2011)

### **Sites of connectedness**

The meaning as represented through the place of symbol has linked racial/ethnic consciousness among diverse peoples with locality, merging them in a translocal manner across national and nation-state boundaries. The notion of 'Burmese' is linked to diverse groups of people of different generations, social classes and historical contexts. We see 'Burmese' as a relic of the past, for local people of Myanmar descent and for local people of Chinese-Myanmar descent of the 'Baba-Burma'. We also see 'Burmese' as an awareness of race/ethnicity among 'Khon-song-nam'.

Finally, we see 'Burmese' clearly and distinctively as it is shown among Myanmar migrant workers who entered the local society more recently. This phenomenon has shown a process in which people, through their perception of space, link one locality to another or link a locality to a broader set or scale of process in what Oakes & Schein (2006: 20) call a 'translocal imaginary'. Then, the people's sense of place has connected diverse and complex localities of different groups. We see here the locality of older generations of local people of Myanmar descent, who identify their sense of place with the place of their ancestors and the place of their current residence in Ranong; the sense of place for 'Khon-song-nam', who maintain ambiguity in their day-to-day life of moving fluidly between Koh Song and Ranong, which they refer to as Myanmar and Thailand; and the locality of Myanmar as homeland and the locality in the host country for migrant workers that are connected through the place of symbol, Dathu Chedi. This is heard through voices of different groups of people as follows:

"We're so proud to join the procession because there was nothing like this before in Ranong. Now the Burmese can dress up as a Burmese and walk side by side with the Thais, walking along the road, even led by the police. Plus, senior people also

join us. It's a Burmese stupa. It's a big festivity. It seems they accept us. They show us deference, not hating Burmese people." (Ko Thu [Pseudonym], 2011)

"That temple belongs to the "Na-Ranong" family. The Burmese built the Chedi and gave it to the governor. It's a historical site. Visitors can see historical evidence. It is said Burmese people built it... And the Na-Ranong family was the driving force behind the celebration. People were able to join it... We're proud that they honor us, because our forefathers and foremothers built it... It's good. Good to have a relationship between the Thais and the Burmese. (Uncle Cho [Pseudonym], 2011)

"These ties will continue forever, as they cross over to visit each other every day. Vendors of different types also go... This relationship will not fade... That they host the celebration is our inseparable relationship. (Supot [Pseudonym], 2011)

### **Place-making process**

The construction of meaning through symbolic religious space is a process of negotiation and adjustment of relations between migrants and local people by the place-making process. Dathu Chedi was built by local people of Myanmar descent, however it is situated in a temple under royal patronage, founded by Ranong's former ruler of Chinese descent. Therefore, the celebration Dathu Chedi is not only a celebration of 'Burmeseness' alone, but a reiteration that 'Burmeseness' as embedded in the context of 'Thainess' and 'Chineseness', all of which are tied to the royal institution. This is reflected in references and worship table sets, which honor the three historical figures who made possible the construction of the temple and Dathu Chedi.

By implication, the celebration of Dathu Chedi is a place-making process, based on custodial knowledge/local knowledge (Appadurai, 1996; Feuchtwang, 2004), to harmonize people from diverse localities and diverse races/ethnicities. Such process is similar to that in Chongyi and Changzhi (2006) who found that the invention of new

traditions in Hainan island, for example, the worship of translocal deity helped to integrate identities and assimilate native Hainan people with mainland Chinese migrants, who were more powerful.

In contrast, Gottowik (2010) demonstrated through a case study of worship rituals of Barong Landung that symbols of ethnic origin for Bali people from intermarriage across ethnicity and religion between the Chinese and Indians, the religion, and culture of Bali people are not formed from a single cultural background, but have origins and roots from people of diverse religions, ethnicities, and even people from beyond the island. Similarly, the existence of Datu Chedi is a reminder that ‘Chineseness’ for local people in Ranong is not based on a single ethnic component, but consistently mixed with ‘Burmeseness’ – both in the sense of place and in terms of racial/ethnic origin. The Burmese migrants’ restoration of the Chedi thus undeniably underscores “Burmeseness”, which is blended in with “Chineseness” in the local community. Likewise, the construction of a Thai-style stupa is the place-making process of restructuring for a harmonious coexistence among diverse peoples in the local society in a process Salzbrunn (2011) calls the restructuring or re-scaling.

## Conclusion

By re-examining the relationship between the local community and participation and establishment of ties to the local community by migrants, through this case study of Ranong province with a focus on historical analysis, it is evident that transboundary movements among people have occurred long before the age of globalization, particularly in the borderland. Furthermore, transboundary migration in contemporary society cannot be viewed as an isolated phenomenon from the past. On the contrary, the establishment of ties to the local community through religious places of symbol has enabled migrants to link the imaginary home to the place of residence, merging themselves as an integral part of the local community. In addition, this practice links ethnic consciousness of diverse groups of people from diverse localities

across local and nation-state boundaries -- a phenomenon that may be called the conjunction of (trans) localities. The religious sphere thus becomes a mediating agent for cultural conflict as well as a negotiating space for effective re-structuring/re-scaling of social relations (Salzbrunn, 2011) between migrants and local people, reflecting the hybridity and complexity in the articulation of localization and globalization.

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### **Interviews**

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