Notes on the Practice of Everyday Politics: Rereading the Labour of Self-protection among Migrant Communities on the Thai-Burma Border

บันทึกปฏิบัติการการเมืองในชีวิตประจำวัน: ทบทวนการปกป้องตนเองของแรงงานในชุมชนผู้ย้ายถิ่นบริเวณชายแดนไทย-พม่า

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บทคัดย่อ

เมื่อไม่กี่ปีที่ผ่านมาได้เกิดข้อถกเถียงจำนวนมากเกี่ยวกับกิจกรรม “ภาคส่วนเรื่องการปกป้อง” ในวงกว้างของบรรดาหมู่นักมนุษยธรรม เช่น การถกเถียงต่อการนำเสนอความคิดเรื่องการปกป้องตนเองในฐานะเป็นมาตรวัดร่วมกัน นอกเหนือไปจากการเล่าเรื่องในเชิงของการตกเป็นเหยื่อของการถูกแทรกแซงของอิทธิพลภายนอกในกลุ่มคนชายขอบเพียงเท่านั้น โดยเฉพาะในพื้นที่บริเวณตะวันออกและตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ของพม่านั้น วาทกรรมว่าด้วยเรื่องการปกป้องตนเองได้เป็นข้อค้นพบของบรรดานักวิจัยและนักปฏิบัติทั้งหลายที่ทำงานในประเด็นที่สัมพันธ์กับหัวข้อเรื่องผู้พลัดถิ่นภายในอยู่ในขณะนี้ อย่างไรก็ตาม การศึกษาดังกล่าวยังคงขาดการค้นพบในเชิงลึกที่ปรากฏในชุมชนผู้ย้ายถิ่นของพื้นที่ ถ้าหากพิจารณาในช่องว่างของรายงาน

ชิ้นนี้ ข้อค้นพบของรายงานวิจัยได้รวบรวมข้อมูลจากช่วง 2-3 ปีที่ผ่านมา ในพื้นที่ชุมชนของผู้ย้ายถิ่นจากพม่า ผู้ย้ายถิ่นเหล่านี้ใช้ชีวิตและอาศัยอยู่ในตัวเมืองแม่สอดและพื้นที่รอบนอก ซึ่งต่างอยู่ในบริเวณชายแดนไทย-พม่า บทความชิ้นนี้ยังให้รายละเอียดเกี่ยวกับยุทธศาสตร์ของการปกป้องตนเองที่สัมพันธ์ในเรื่องการเข้าถึงด้านสุขภาพ อาหาร การดำรงชีพ และความมั่นคงส่วนบุคคล นอกจากนี้ การวิเคราะห์ได้หยิบเอากรอบคิดของปฏิบัติการดังกล่าวในฐานะเป็น “การเมืองระดับชีวิตประจำวัน” ในพื้นที่ซึ่งชุมชนผู้ย้ายถิ่นเรียกร้องสิทธิไปโดยปริยายเพื่อการดำรงชีวิตอยู่รอดในด้านจริยธรรมและวัฒนธรรม การทำความเข้าใจชีวิตประจำวันในเชิงการทำให้เป็นเรื่องการเมือง (อีกครั้ง) ในชุมชนของผู้ย้ายถิ่นได้นำพาไปสู่กรอบคิดที่กว้างขึ้นของแรงงานย้ายถิ่นจากพม่า ในคำอธิบายของไมเคิล เอดาส กรอบคิดดังกล่าวสามารถเข้าใจได้ในฐานะเป็นรูปแบบของ “การประท้วงอย่างหลีกเลี่ยง” นอกจากนี้ยังเป็นการต้านต่อฉากหลังของพม่าที่หันกลับมาสู่ความเป็นเสรีนิยมใหม่ ซึ่งทำให้เป็นการเปลี่ยนย้ายครั้งใหญ่ในการคิดคำนวณต่อยุทธศาสตร์การดึงเข้า-ผลักออกที่ได้ดำเนินมาอย่างเนิ่นนานในส่วนการก่อร่างความเป็นพลวัตของการย้ายถิ่นในพื้นที่ชายแดนที่เกิดขึ้น เช่น เปลี่ยนความหมายต่อการอดทนเพื่อสร้างความรู้สึกที่แข็งแกร่งขึ้นต่อการสนองตอบที่เป็นรูปธรรมในสถานการณ์ที่แน่นอนและไม่แน่นอนของผู้ย้ายถิ่น ในจุดนี้พิสูจน์ได้ว่าเป็นวาระสำคัญสำหรับนักวิจัยและนักปฏิบัติทั้งหลายที่อยู่แถวหน้าในทุกวันนี้

คำสำคัญ: แรงงานผู้ย้ายถิ่น, การปกป้องตนเอง, การเมืองระดับชีวิตประจำวัน, ความปลอดภัย/ความไม่มั่นคง

Abstract

In recent years, there are several critiques of conventional 'protection-sector' activities among humanitarian actors. Such critiques have raised the idea of self-protection as a corrective measure to otherwise victimizing narratives of external intervention among marginalized people. In eastern and southeastern Burma, the discourse of self-protection has found currency among researchers and practitioners working on issues related to internally displaced people (IDPs). However, there seems a lack of in-depth exploration among migrant communities in this area. Addressing this research gap, this paper presents research findings that are collected over the past two to three years among migrant communities from Burma. These migrants live and work in and around Mae Sot which is located at the Thai-Burma border. This paper attempts to detail self-protection strategies in relation to health, food, livelihoods and personal security access. In addition, this analysis seeks to frame these actions as an 'everyday politics' whereby migrant communities implicitly lay claim to a subsistence ethic and a culture of survival. This (re)politicized understanding of everyday life in migrant communities takes place within a broader frame of labour migration from Burma. In Michael Adas's term, this framework can be understood as a form of 'avoidance protest.' Further, against the backdrop of Burma's neoliberal turn, there seems to be a great shift in the calculus of push-pull strategy which has long played a part in shaping border-area migration dynamics. Such shifting bears implication for a heightened sensitivity to migrants' concrete responses in uncertain and insecure situations. This proves to be an imperative agenda for researchers and practitioners at the forefront today.

Keywords: Migrant Labour, Protection/Self-protection, Everyday Politics, Security/Insecurity

> Peasant migration from the lands of an unpopular lord, for example, was both a means by which the group in flight protected itself from what it felt to be excessive exactions and a dramatic way of protesting and drawing attention to the maladministration of the noble or official in question. The option of flight was in turn dependent upon a low population density, the availability of refuge zones or unoccupied lands in which the runaways could settle, and a relatively low level of administrative control and coercive capacity.
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> - Michael Adas, "From Avoidance to Confrontation" (1981)

> And as to the causes of social change, I look at it this way - ideas are a sort of parliament, but there's a commonwealth outside, and a good deal of commonwealth is working at change without knowing what the parliament is doing.
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> - George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, cited in Scott 1985 (304)

Introduction

This paper takes as its point of departure a certain critical reading of cross-border migration flows from Burma to Thailand in the past two to three decades. For, while dominant analyses largely read mobility in these borderlands in the narrow terms of labour migration and wage differentials, a broader historical lens and a politics *engagé* reveal the considerable degree to which overly economizing analyses are insufficient to the materials at hand. Rather, the substantial movement of migrants

and their families from Burma's agricultural lowlands to labour-hungry sectors mostly in Thailand and Malaysia - accounting for a substantial percentage of Burma's total labour force -is legible as a vast and profoundly material repudiation of everyday life under military rule in Burma. As "a dramatic way of protesting and drawing attention to the maladministration of the noble or official in question" (Adas 1981: 219) - in this case, Burma's resilient military power complex -the mobility of migrant workers must be (re)politicized in the register of critique, in the Thai-Burma borderlands as elsewhere.

Such a (re)politicization of movement and mobility is fraught with difficulties. Among them is the concern that, in tying migrant communities to questions of political dissent and criticism vis-à-vis military rule in Burma, one might too closely associate migrants and their families with the elite world of electoral politics and Burma's bourgeois democracy movement, thereby enlarging the writ of elite politics through the appropriation of a much more autonomous, and institutionally ambiguous, movement of peasants-cum-workers. In fact, the intention here is the opposite. Drawing on James C. Scott's landmark work on moral economies and everyday resistance strategies among peasants in Southeast Asia (see Scott 1976, 1985), this paper seeks to localize the rather wide-angle idea of mobility as critique by considering what migrants do to protect themselves in migrant communities along the Thai-Burma border. This approach is meant to foreground the agency and autonomy of these communities, rejecting the idea that their mobility casts them as mere objects of structural dynamics in Burma's political economy.

Indeed, this paper focuses on migrants' self-protection strategies: what migrants do *on the ground* to evade, contain, and confront threats and challenges to and in their communities? Framed within the broader - and fairly well-covered, in secondary literatures -context in which mobility as such can be read as critique of and resistance to coercive and repressive forms of power not only in Burma but elsewhere,[1] the question of migrant self-protection as a localized set of methods and strategies implicitly raises a question that brings in issues of scale. What is the relationship between panoramic readings of 'flight as protest' and what people on the move actually do to get by, as it were, once they arrive in a transit or destination community? I want to suggest that a kind of "everyday politics" (Hull 2009, citing Kerkvliet 2002) informs migrants' self-protection strategies, showing what manoeuvres are necessary at local levels for the larger-scale possibility of politicized mobility to unfold. Put differently, this study of self-protection is a grounded look at what is surely a more generalized movement: migrants from Burma "working the system to their minimum disadvantage," as Eric Hobsbawm has said of peasants (Hobsbawm 1973, quoted in Scott 1985: 301), not only in the millions in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but also in relatively small-scale communities in and around a Thai border town on the Thai-Burma border.

Considering how migrants work the system, what they do to get by, this paper represents an attempt to frame migrants' self-protection strategies as a set of efforts designed to ameliorate systemic and local violence (framed here as a variety of challenges), and thereby stake an implied claim to a basic standard of survival, a kind of floor-level communal

subsistence. Scott reads actions like these in the register of resistance. When Scott describes actions he encountered in Malaysia among peasant communities, he observes that “much of this struggle can also be read as an effort by the poor to resist the economic and ritual marginalization they now suffer and to insist on the minimal cultural decencies of citizenship in this small community” (Scott 1985: xviii). This connection between resisting marginalization and insisting on basic standards, however implicitly or indirectly, should also come through in this study of migrants from Burma.

In his earlier work, Scott looks at peasant rebellion as exemplars of open resistance, largely in Vietnam and Burma; while in his subsequent fieldwork in Malaysia, Scott details the more quiet and mundane, more everyday, means by which peasants can resist structures of local domination. Later, in a brief essay, Scott describes such actions in the language of self-protection, referring to peasants’ “Polanyian reflexes of self-protection” in the face of the advances, in the early 20th century, of “a more implacable state” and “a larger market nexus” (Scott 2005: 397). This paper, rather than focusing on outright labour unrest in the form of strikes or other mobilizations, looks instead at the more everyday strategies through which migrants from Burma in the Thai-Burma border area, in elaborating an everyday politics based on a practice of self-protection, provide an implicit local-level critique of state- and capital-based violence - within, that is, the wider frame of migration itself as a protection strategy. As we will see, today’s border-area migrants and Scott’s peasants of decades past may share much in common.

A border-area study of Polanyian self-protection may have particular relevance now, as the local and regional calculus of push and pull that has long had a hand in shaping migration flows in these borderlands is somewhat in flux. Burma's nominally civilian government has moved forward a number of political and economic reforms that, while potentially stabilizing conditions for migrants and their families in source and destination communities, also stand to deepen regional economic integration, extending even further the already-formidable reach of neoliberal capitalism in mainland Southeast Asia.[2] As Burma's links to global supply chains become firmer, the backdrop of protracted instability in global markets becomes more relevant for migrant communities, as border-area migrants have been shown to be very much vulnerable to global-level economic shocks (Aung and Aung 2009, Pollock and Aung 2010).[3]

The manifest insecurity of migrant labour in this context of "neoliberal involution" (Burawoy 2010) foregrounds the question of self-protection. In concrete terms: How will migrants get by? Situated relative to traditional 'protection-sector' work by humanitarian actors and NGOs, this study aims to suggest that external interventions in migrant communities, however well-intentioned, are ill-conceived if they do not take stock of what migrants are already doing in their communities to mitigate challenges on their own behalf - especially as the volume of what migrants can do on their own, in critical times like the present, vastly exceeds the maximum that external actors could ever contribute. Thus, the paper begins with a discussion of critiques of conventional protection-sector activities, then proceeds to self-protection strategies

broken into a light typology of four different categories: health-related, food-related, livelihoods-related, and those related to personal security (e.g. in the case of police raids on factories). In the conclusion, a return to broader questions will bring the paper to an end.

In this paper, migrants' self-protection strategies have been grouped according to four areas: access to health, food, livelihoods, and personal security. A prior section giving background on protection discourse and mobility patterns in the Thai-Burma border area. The findings presented here come from a study carried out by a MAP Foundation research team led by the author between September and November 2010, with a focus on human security issues in migrant communities.[4] Findings related to self-protection were only a part of that research; here those findings are the main focus. All respondents - with the exception of several key informants - are migrant workers from Burma who, at the time of research, were living and working in and around Mae Sot, Thailand. It is hardly a uniform group: key variables, all pursued with a degree of focused attention, include gender, sector, age, documentation status, and work experience in Thailand. Methodologies focused on qualitative research instruments, including key informant interviews and in-depth interviews with twenty respondents, four focus group discussions including a total of 55 migrants, and a widely distributed written survey that drew several hundred responses, albeit of variable utility. Sampling procedures were in line with standard qualitative methods. The research team mainly used purposive sampling, with an emphasis on snowball methods, dimensional sampling, and geographical sampling.

Migration and Protection on the Thai-Burma Border

Cross-border migration flows from Burma to Thailand have often been understood in two stages. First, as conflict between Karen and Burmese forces intensified in eastern Burma in the early and mid-1990s, many thousands of Karen refugees crossed into Thailand, where substantial communities remain in refugee camps. Second, in the mid- to late 1990s and well into the next decade, economic stagnation in Burma and a surging Thai economy - the 1997 crisis notwithstanding - are understood to have drawn more than two million purely economic migrants from all over Burma into Thailand.[5] This prevailing narrative justifies international protection for camp-based refugees while denying protection assistance to people from Burma who migrated outside of the camp infrastructure. Framed as voluntary economic migrants, this vast majority of migrants from Burma are everyday subject to arrest, detention, and deportation, as well as a host of other pressing challenges in their communities.

This distinctly apolitical reading of the majority of border-area migration flows has been subject to a growing critical literature in recent years, with researchers, activists, and civil society organizations suggesting that migrants from Burma - those who are mobile outside of the camp infrastructure - have legitimate protection concerns in Thailand. According to this view, in lieu of officially sanctioned protection from the Royal Thai Government (RTG) or international organisations, migrants move to protect themselves - both from endemic poverty and political repression in Burma, and in concerted efforts to evade, contain, and confront challenges to

migrant communities in destination communities in Thailand. This study details the strategies migrants from Burma use to protect themselves in communities in and around Mae Sot, a Thai border district where a high concentration of migrant labour tends towards employment in export-oriented garment and textile factories, agricultural and domestic work, and a range of other sectors and occupations. A brief discussion of critical literature around “protection-sector” work in international NGOs and humanitarian organizations should help orient this study.

Critiques of conventional protection-sector programming tend to trace such work to its founding through a number of international organisations and institutions. Among United Nations (UN) bodies, intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and national governments and donors working in humanitarian assistance, “protection” has been defined according to definitions developed in the 1990s by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), with primary focuses on the international human rights regime, and humanitarian and refugee law. The incorporation of protection elements into the on-going Sphere initiative, an international, inter-agency project designed to develop and promote core standards for humanitarian response, testifies to the continued relevance of protection debates among international humanitarian agencies.[6]

While critiques of the humanitarian protection sector have been diverse and wide-ranging, two lines of criticism are particularly relevant for this discussion. One faults protection work for its limited ability to

account for what local communities do themselves to resist abuse, while the other criticizes the protection sector for being unresponsive to the reality of migration and displacement. The first criticism, which we can call the local critique, has been particularly well developed with respect to internally displaced people (IDPs) in eastern Burma. According to Hull (2008: 3, citing Heppner 2005: 31), a researcher for the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), "As with humanitarian assistance more generally, conventional IDP protection frameworks are likewise biased towards a top-down model of politically-averse intervention which marginalizes local initiatives to resist abuse and hinders local control over protection efforts."

In response to this model of protection, KHRG has sought to build programs that support and promote Karen communities' self-protection strategies, highlighting the agency and the voice of Karen villagers in responding to abuse and human rights violations in eastern Burma (see KHRG 2008 and 2010). This approach has drawn on a broader recognition that in cases of humanitarian emergency, relevant international agencies can only ever reach a percentage of affected populations. Local communities handle protection first, and even after agencies are able to respond, they remain the central actors. Andrew Bonwick has phrased this situation well.

> A rarely spoken truth about protection is that the main players in the protection of civilians in conflict are the civilians themselves. Rightly or wrongly, when civilians are most in need of protection, the humanitarian agencies are hardly ever present. The humanitarian presence in Chechnya is negligible. Agencies were absent from Western Upper Nile in Sudan when a massive offensive was burning people from their

> homes (Christian Aid 2002). As hundreds of thousands of people fled from their homes in Afghanistan in 2002, few agencies crossed the border from Pakistan. (Bonwick 2006: 6)

Aid agencies operating out of Yangon have to some degree taken up this concern as well, in some cases as a part of broader attempts to explore local input in the protection sector in conflict situations elsewhere (South et al 2010a, 2010b). These approaches highlight the need to consider protection centrally as a question of self-protection, as the range of strategies by which marginalised and at-risk communities by turns evade, contain, and confront threats to individuals and their communities.

The second protection criticism key to this discussion, which we can call the definitional critique, is more specific to migrant and migration issues. This line of argument contends that migrants who do not fit narrow categories of forced migration and refugee flows nonetheless may have legitimate protection concerns. Researchers and NGOs working on migrant and migration issues along the Thai-Burma border have begun developing this criticism more vocally in recent years, as an understanding has emerged that conventional protection frameworks have enabled only a small fraction of people from Burma to receive protection assistance. According to this literature, many more people deserve such assistance.

In a relatively early study pursuing this criticism, a 2002 report for Refugees International argues that “persecution, fear and human rights abuses” are the primary drivers of migration from Burma to Thailand,

and yet upon their arrival in Thailand, people from Burma are overwhelmingly classified as economic migrants. With arbitrary lines drawn between forced and economic migration, a matter of definition serves to exclude the vast majority of cross-border migrants from protection assistance afforded to people classified as forcibly displaced.

> These faulty distinctions often result in the vast majority of people being denied asylum and protection and the superficial identification of millions as simply economic migrants. Hence, untold numbers of people from Burma are placed at considerable risk while in Thailand and, if deported, are often delivered back into environments that are abusive and deny their most basic rights. (Caouette and Pack 2002: 3)

A more recent study by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) presents a similar argument. Drawing on a survey of 1,704 migrants from Burma living in Thailand - with the stated goal of "assessing the degree to which (migrants from Burma) merit international protection as refugees" - the study concludes that the classification of many people from Burma in Thailand as "mere economic migrants" renders inaccessible protection mechanisms and related forms of assistance to many who deserve them.

> Our findings suggest that a great number of currently unprotected Burmese in Thailand, possibly as many as fifty per cent, merit further investigation as to their refugee status; and that only a small number of Burmese who warrant refugee status and attendant services actually receive any aid or protection either from the Thai government or from international aid agencies. (Green-Rauenhorst et al 2008: 2)

IRC followed this study with a more substantial report published in early 2012, which further highlights the challenges migrants face in and around the Mae Sot area. The report argues that official protection assistance should be extended to migrants in the face of the inadequate perceptions of border-area migration dynamics - which persist, incorrectly, in framing the vast majority of cross-border migrants as voluntary economic migrants (IRC 2012). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and KHRG have also looked towards a renewed understanding of border-area mobility, underscoring the role of human rights abuses in driving migration flows that are too narrowly construed in economic terms (Pungpond 2009, KHRG 2009).

Recent research conducted by MAP Foundation has called attention to this literature, as well, with focuses on protection and human security in migrant communities, and migration itself as a self-protection strategy writ large (Aung et al 2010, Aung 2010a). In a 2011 article, Jackie Pollock, Director of MAP Foundation, summed up the futility of building strict definitions to apply to migrant communities: “The profiling of people who move is being increasingly institutionalised. They may be labelled the ‘migrant worker’, the ‘refugee’ or the ‘trafficked person’ but people’s life experiences resist being so neatly categorised” (Pollock 2011).[7] MAP Foundation is also an active member of the Mekong Migration Network (MMN), which has sought to question distinctions between voluntary and forced migration in regional and global forums.[8]

Strategies for Self-protection

Despite this extensive discussion in recent years of the need to revisit conventional protection-sector activities and perceptions of cross-border mobility, there has been little effort to understand what migrants do themselves to respond to such structural marginalization. Taking account of this research gap, this section details the actual self-protection strategies used by migrants from Burma and their families who are living and working in and around Mae Sot, Thailand, a district in Thailand's northwest Tak Province that borders on eastern Burma. Security concerns relating to health, food, livelihoods, personal security are discussed below.

In the Mae Sot area, upwards of 200,000 migrants from Burma work in a range of sectors and occupations. Some 300 garment and textile factories, along with other light manufacturing facilities, provide the most common form of employment for migrants crossing from Burma, but migrants also work in agriculture, construction, domestic work, shops and marketplaces, the sex and entertainment industries, garbage sites, and many forms of informal employment (such as daily work and piece work). Women are central to Mae Sot's migrant labour force, constituting some 80-90% of factory labour in the area, while roughly 75-80% of migrants work without formal documentation.[9]

Health Strategies

Workers from Burma living in and around Mae Sot face myriad challenges related to health and access to health treatment services. These challenges include, but are not limited to, lack of legal

documentation, lack of financial resources, language difficulties, and travel limitations (including difficulty passing through checkpoints). Cross-cutting factors include gender, age, and work experience: women, young migrants, and recently arrived migrants are likely to face more health-related challenges than other migrants in the Mae Sot area. Further differentiation by sector also plays a role, as rural agricultural workers face a different set of health challenges than factory workers and other workers who live in Mae Sot's relatively more urban areas.

Given this situation, comments by migrants tend to focus on the need to avoid certain travel risks en route to and from clinics and other treatment centres, and methods for avoiding the need to travel altogether, namely by seeking more localised treatment in villages or immediate migrant areas. The Mae Tao Clinic (MTC), an unofficial clinic founded to serve migrant communities at no cost, comes up often in migrants' comments. Referencing travel difficulties, one migrant said, "We use the short-cut road when we go to Mae Tao Clinic or Mae Sot market" (FGD 1).

Other comments referenced trade-offs between going to MTC - and thus risking travel risks - or seeking more localised treatment.

> We [my husband and I] can go and get treatment when we get sick at Mae Tao Clinic, Thai private clinic, Mae Sot General Hospital, or home private nurse like Mr. Moo Sein. He is a Muslim man who can speak Burmese fluently. Most of the migrant workers go to him. (IDI 1)

This comment highlights the importance of language concerns in structuring migrants' responses to health-related challenges. While more institutional health treatment options in the Mae Sot area - such as Mae

Sot General Hospital and various government-run and private clinics - are considerably more likely to offer translation now than a few years ago, language remains a key element of how migrants choose to seek and access treatment.

According to a factory worker living in an area outside Mae Sot,

> "We usually go to Mae Tao Clinic when we get sick or are injured. Sometimes we also go to private nurses or clinics where people speak Burmese, and can communicate easily. Then we can secure cheaper payment" (FGD 2).

Language can thus be a key factor in migrants' decision-making, as well as a consideration for limiting costs - accessing treatment options where a language will be shared emerges as a strategy that may not only optimize treatment quality, but also minimize the cost of that treatment. Sometimes this means seeking treatment in more local areas outside of Mae Sot, rather than traveling into the municipal area. According to a domestic worker based in one relatively rural area,

> I usually buy both foreign and Burmese medicine at the shop close to us [Mae Tao sub-district]. If you tell the shop-keeper the symptoms you're feeling they will give a small package of pills that are already mixed. The cost will depend on the illness. (IDI 8)[10]

In cases that are not extreme, localized self-treatment is often preferable for migrants. Especially for rural agricultural workers, for whom travel to the Mae Sot municipal area is at best a difficult option, access to Mae Tao Clinic and Mae Sot General Hospital is very limited. In this

situation, migrants rely on village-level treatment methods that involve purchasing cheap medicines from local shops, or using 'herbal' methods passed down via family members and within local migrant communities. One worker interviewed for this research (IDI 2) commented that these more rural treatment methods are often the same methods used in communities these migrants came from inside Burma—that is, rural communities where public health infrastructure is limited. Thus migrants carry certain knowledge and practices with them during their journeys.

A woman working in Mae Tao sub-district highlighted the importance of seeking local treatment.

> We go to Mae Tao Clinic when we get sick, and also use Burmese herbal treatment, but most of the time we buy a mixed package of medicine at the shops close to us. (FGD 3)

Migrants spoke often of strategies that involve accessing treatment options outside of official, government-run clinics and hospitals. Localised treatment, private nurses, and services offered by NGOs figure largely in migrants' comments. The need to rely on friends, family, and co-workers came up as well. "We assist to each other when we get sick or need help," said an agricultural worker from Mae Tao Mai (IDI 5). The same worker also spoke of "unofficial" treatment:

> I buy a package of pills when I get pains in my body or a headache after working all day. I also take injections outside the clinic with unofficial private nurses who know how to treat the sickness. Sometimes I use Burmese herbs to treat myself. (IDI 5)

A construction worker living in the same area made reference to the work of NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs).

> When my family gets sick they go to Mae Tao Clinic, and for me I ask for aid from MAP or 'Khun Arr Thit' [New Strength, a migrant worker association], which are Burmese associations assisting migrant workers here. (IDI 21)

Taken together, these comments reveal a number of key characteristics of migrants' self-protection strategies as they relate to health challenges in their communities. First, migrants use alternative routes to access medical treatment to avoid encountering police and other local authorities, thereby evading associated threats as much as possible. Second, migrants often make use of locally based, informal networks of friends, family, and co-workers for primary-level treatment of illness and injury. Cross-border knowledge networks, for example around the use of herbal treatment methods, reinforce the ability of migrants to protect themselves in the Mae Sot area. Third, migrants have helped contribute to the agglomeration of reactive, community-based treatment that balances out the in-gathering of public services, and in this case health services, in areas that are difficult or undesirable for migrants to access. When migrants reach out to and coordinate with external actors in migrant communities, whether those actors are MAP Foundation or private, unofficial health workers, they are assisting in the building up of health treatment options in their communities.

Based on these comments, the following are a selection of health-related self-protection strategies used by migrants and their families in areas in and around Mae Sot.

- Using alternative routes to access health treatment sites, in order to minimize exposure to - and costs related to exposure to, such as bribes and other official and unofficial fees - police and other local authorities
- Maintaining informal networks, sometimes locally but sometimes cross-border, that can sustain and develop relevant health-related responses and strategies
- Sharing such knowledge through and among these networks, including friends, family, and co-workers
- Limiting unnecessary health-related travel overall by strategically judging the severity of illnesses and injuries
- Seeking and accessing migrant-friendly, and often unofficial, health treatment options and services, such as those provided by the Mae Tao Clinic, “private” nurses, and local clinics
- Using self-treatment methods when possible, including “herbal” remedies and medicines purchased at local shops
- Seeking out service providers who speak migrants’ languages, in order to minimize costs and other difficulties
- Coordinating with NGOs, CBOs, and other non-governmental actors to help build options for health treatment in areas that are easier for migrants to access

Food Strategies

Migrants' comments on food and food-related challenges suggest that the supply of food in and around Mae Sot is not at the centre of their concerns. Rather, the key challenges migrants face in relation to food are accessing and paying for it. These factors can be difficult for migrants to control. Indeed, frustration over this lack of control is evident in many comments from migrants and their families. Fickle job security, fluctuating economic cycles, seasonal agricultural and production patterns, living arrangements limited to factory compounds, the ever-present possibility of police crackdowns and mass arrests - all of these factors impact migrants' food consumption habits, and thus how migrants strategize in relation to these constraints. Migrants also regularly report that wages do not keep pace with rising goods prices, including food prices.

These factors impact migrants' food responses in various ways. Factory workers often receive daily food as part of their employment arrangement, yet leaving factory compounds or the vicinity of a factory can be difficult or not permitted - which impedes access to other markets and different food options. Some workers report foraging for certain types of food in the forest - especially mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and various other kinds of vegetables - as a strategy to balance out shifting wages or a means of gaining extra income (by selling to market vendors). Other workers commented that during periods of economic difficulty, drying and preserving food in advance can be important for maintaining food supply.

A piece worker in a sub-district north of Mae Sot municipality offered the following comment on foraging for food in the forest:

> I go to the forest sometimes to find vegetables for my family, and if I get a lot of bamboo and other vegetables, then I send them to a Thai shop. (IDI 7)

And a domestic worker in Mae Tao sub-district, an area just south of Mae Sot municipality, described how she often depends on her husband's salary for food for their family:

> I always pray to Buddha to bless my family for good health and income every day, because if my husband is sick, we will be in trouble without food, and giving pocket money to our children when they go to school will be more difficult. (IDI 8)

The relationships between workplace location or type, and migrants' access to markets or dependence on employers, are key determinants of how migrants access food, and whether or not they can afford it. Comments from the domestic worker in Mae Tao sub-district show that sometimes migrants must travel in order to secure low prices, which in turn leads to exposure to checkpoints and police presence:

> I usually go to Mae Sot Market once a week to buy rice, food, and other things that I need at home, in order to save money for my children. Also if you buy here [Mae Tao sub-district] it is quite expensive. (IDI 8)

Meanwhile, a construction worker based in a sub-district north of Mae Sot municipality commented that at her site, access to markets or shops of any kind is limited.

> My family and I take daily food from one of the shops in this construction compound, because we don't have time to go to the market and cook after work. Therefore we pay the shopkeeper every two weeks after receiving payment from the employer. The price for the food is more expensive than usual, but we do not have other choices. The other workers here are doing the same. (IDI 13)

Migrants also discussed growing food for themselves, sometimes with their employer allowing them to use some land for this purpose. Agricultural workers were more likely to engage this strategy than workers in other sectors, but they were not alone in using this method. For example, a participant in a focus group discussion with construction workers said,

> We sell the vegetable that we look for in the forest, and we grow in the empty land next to our house. (FGD 1)

Many migrants also report that wages do not sufficiently keep pace with changes in the price of everyday goods, including food. Wages that are either chronically low or insufficiently elastic contribute to migrants' food-related challenges (see Aung and Aung 2009). Insecure wages then help explain how migrants explore strategies for accessing food that are relatively free of marketplace transactions (such as growing food for family consumption, or foraging for vegetables in forests). Given that wages fluctuate with production cycles and seasonal employment arrangements, migrants' responses are often countercyclical. They are strategies for maintaining food availability during low seasons, economic recessions, or periods of wage movement and unpredictability.

- Overall, as these comments suggest, migrants' food-related self-protection strategies include the following:
- foraging for vegetables and other food options in the forest, and using this food either for consumption or for selling in the market
- preparing more preserved food, such as dried shrimp and chilis, in advance of low seasons or difficult economic periods
- buying less meat and more vegetables in order to accommodation wage fluctuations when necessary
- shopping at some markets rather than other markets in pursuit of lower prices—which may result in different food options being available
- cultivating food on agricultural premises for consumption and sale by migrants rather than by owners
- taking up daily work and piece work to supplement family incomes in critical times, or when a more regular position is terminated
- saving money in advance of difficult periods in order to be able to continue to afford to purchase food

Livelihood Strategies

Migrants' responses to economic challenges - including, centrally, issues related to the question of livelihoods - are likely some of the central

self-protection strategies migrants use to survive in difficult everyday conditions. Given the linkages between economic concerns and other challenges in migrants' communities, including both migrants' ability to provide food for their families and access health treatment services, inevitably these economic responses are not economic alone. Yet in various ways they recognizably engage economic issues in a relatively primary way.

Responses to job insecurity often include a reliance on localized networks of friends, family, and co-workers to find work at a different job site (for example, outside of a given factory, or at a different set of fields, or at a different factory). Migrants go to teashops and other places to meet with friends and share information. In that sense, in order for these networks to be strong, and for migrants to be able to access them, certain kinds of space are necessary. Public spaces like tea shops were highlighted as important for the collection and exchange of information, whereas migrants also come together in semi-formal workshop settings to circulate and gain knowledge. That such space exists, and grows when possible, is thus an important component of economic self-protection for migrant communities. This kind of space is also important for other forms of economic challenges noted above, while the use of technology like mobile phones in some cases can stand in for access to such space.

One migrant participating in a focus group discussion with construction workers also noted that experience in the area is important for finding jobs:

> Some people can find a job easily, because they have been here for so long, and have friends at many construction sites. Sometimes we contact each other to share information about finding jobs. (FGD 1)

In the same focus group, another participant commented on how migrants sometimes respond to the timing of wage payment.

> Most of the families in this community borrow money from the manager each month, and pay back the manager after receiving wages. We need to borrow this money, because we do not have extra savings otherwise. (FGD 1)

In a certain sense, even migrants' commitment to securing overtime hours, and thus greater pay, can be understood as a self-protection strategy.[11] According to a factory worker who participated in this research,

> Even we who work in the factory do not have regular work each day, because there are low orders sometimes. Then if there are orders, then we have to work overtime until the next morning, maybe until 4 am, and then get up for work again at 8 am. We don't want to lose this chance, so we have to work. (FGD 2)

Indeed, the precarious quality of migrants and their families' wage situation has been noted as a key feature of the challenges facing migrant communities in the Mae Sot area (MAP 2010a). As reported by migrant communities reached in this research, ever-shifting job cycles and seasonal production changes, as noted previously, offer little assurance of reliable and steady income, with job security tied to a host of factors beyond the control of individual migrants and migrant communities. During low seasons and times of economic recession, such as the recent

global economic downturn, migrants increasingly take on short-term, temporary work, often in the informal sector. Migrants' comments suggest that the general, if not exhaustive, exclusion of migrant communities from formalized contract employment, a reality due to two decades of failed registration schemes and a host of additional socio-political factors, is surely a central attribute of economic insecurity among migrant communities. Flexible, precarious work dominates the employment landscape in the area.

Research findings also suggest, unsurprisingly, that as with other forms of security, economic insecurity is not uniform among migrants. Participants' comments confirm once again that gender remains an important determinant of where an individual fits into local wage hierarchies (see Aung and Aung 2009, Aung 2010b, Pollock and Aung 2010), while sectoral differentiation is somewhat less clear: it depends on further variables like time of year (low seasons differ by sector), location, the age of an individual, and when she or he arrived in the area (which helps determine level of experience). In addition, governmental safety nets are all but unavailable to migrant communities, in the Mae Sot area and elsewhere in Thailand.

At other focus groups, migrants made mention of several strategies designed to protect against arrest and extortion by local authorities, whether at checkpoints or in detention. Evasion is central here. A key strategy to evade checkpoints involves drawing on the same local networks mentioned above to share information about checkpoint locations, often through friends and family, as a kind of informal early

warning system. Then migrants can avoid the checkpoints altogether, using different routes or reconsidering travel plans. When migrants do encounter local authorities at checkpoints, strategies involve paying a certain amount of money, or at least keeping some available, to avoid arrest or secure release, both of which protect against higher fees to be paid in cases of full arrest and deportation.

> Most of the women hide their money in the part of their bodies that police won't check. This is the most effective way for us. (FGD 1)

> We fold the money to show the picture of the king. Some police won't arrest or take money from us, because they respect the king so much. (FGD 1)

> We usually bring 100 baht in our pocket, because if it is necessary we can use it to get released from being arrested by police. (FGD 2)

Other migrants reached over the course of this research described how they would sometimes bring on the motorbike someone who speaks Thai, in case of encountering a checkpoint. Others discussed folding bills in half and passing them quickly to police, seemingly offering a higher amount of money, and taking advantage of the need for police to take money quickly to avoid being detected as receiving such payment. Still other migrants said that they wear certain kinds of clothing, try to act confidently, or use jokes or even harsh language with police. All of these strategies have been used by migrants to limit the threats represented by checkpoints.

Exemplifying some of the above strategies, one female factory worker described her approach to checkpoints as follows:

> I always wear proper clothes as a Thai girl when I go to Mae Sot market. I was arrested one time two years ago, and I had to pay 600 baht to get released. After that, whenever I go outside I take a child (though the child is not mine) with me to avoid getting arrested. (FGD 2)

Of the many strategies migrants have elaborated over the years around confronting checkpoint situations, the most effective self-protection strategy is likely full evasion of these checkpoints altogether. One migrant noted that in case of serious sickness or injury, when travel to Mae Tao Clinic cannot be avoided, it is best to use the 'short-cut road, which crosses rice farms and sugarcane fields' (IDI 11). This and other methods of evasion are key tactics for migrants seeking self-protection, not only in the case of checkpoints, but vis-à-vis other threats as well.

Finally, as noted previously, migrants also are able to sell vegetables to Thai shopkeepers when they can't maintain a shop themselves, thereby securing some level of participation in local markets that are otherwise difficult for migrants to access. This too can be understood as a self-protection strategy, particularly when travel to markets is either difficult or undesirable. Economic self-protection strategies thus include the following:

- Sharing information about job openings and other employment opportunities

- Ensuring such information can be shared quickly and effectively - by using mobile phones, for example, and by maintaining informal networks of family, friends, and co-workers
- Strategizing borrowing decisions based on the timing of wage payments
- Securing overtime hours when possible in order to optimize earnings and savings potentials
- Minimizing costs incurred at checkpoints by evading checkpoints - through informal warning systems and elaboration of alternative routes
- Limiting checkpoint expenditures through negotiation and deception, such as by folding bills in half to make the quantity appear double what it is
- Always keeping some limited pocket money on one's person to pay at checkpoints when necessary, thus avoiding higher fees related to arrest, detention, and deportation

Personal Security Strategies

The notion of "personal security" may at first seem an ambiguous idea in this setting, however it is an important dimension of what migrants do everyday to protect themselves and their communities. In the UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report, personal security is schematized to include (not exhaustively) threats from one's state or other states, threats

from other individuals or groups of people, and threats targeted at women (UNDP 1994: 30).

Challenges related to these kinds of threats are part of the living and working conditions migrants face daily: conflict and ethnic tensions remain a key driver of cross-border migration into Thailand, helping to shape the experience of migration for workers in the border area. Yet even upon arrival in the Mae Sot area, migrants can face threats to their persons from a host of different actors - from local and national authorities at checkpoints or during crackdowns and mass arrests, from local Thai citizens in instances of violence or intimidation, from migrants' employers, from other migrants from Burma, and from other members of one's own household (for example, in the case of gender-based violence).

Thailand's military and police have come under some scrutiny around these issues in recent years. The rape of a migrant woman at a police checkpoint made headlines in Thailand in 1999 (MAP 2006); a 2008 report on arrest, detention, and deportation highlighted harassment within these actions (MMN 2008); and in 2010, several instances of police violence led to the deaths of migrants - 9 Karen migrants were fatally shot by local police in Phob Phra, south of Mae Sot, while an additional 9 Chin migrants died when police fired at and gave chase to their vehicle (MMN 22/06/10).

Women migrants who participated in this research were hesitant to speak openly about personal issues like domestic violence, family dynamics, and questions of personal security within this context. Workplace harassment and abuse questions produced few comments,

as well.[12] Despite reticence around some personal security issues, migrants were more willing to comment on their interactions with police and other authorities, what they do in cases of crackdowns and raids, and how they coordinate with others to respond to related challenges.

Personal insecurity is likely one of the more difficult forms of insecurity to protect against; often times doing so involves limiting one's own movements, or planning them carefully in relation to potential threats. For example, migrants report that in order to avoid exposure to abuse and violence by local Thai citizens, migrants often try to avoid leaving their place of work. In addition, as noted previously, migrants use alternative routes to avoid checkpoints; they also flee to fields nearby their workplaces—especially corn fields and sugarcane fields, which are desirable for the concealment offered by the height of the plants—in cases of crackdowns and mass arrests.

Migrants report that when they do choose to flee, they coordinate with family, friends, and co-workers in the area to determine strategic hiding places. They also coordinate with community organizations and non-governmental actors to secure emergency relief, including food, shelter, medicine, and communication with people who can instruct when they should leave their site. When planning these escape strategies, it is important to have a good sense of the movements and impending actions of authorities, so migrants also report sharing information and monitoring in advance of crackdowns and arrests.

Migrants reached for this research commented on a number of different strategies that help them protect against personal insecurity

of these kinds. According to construction workers participating in a focus group discussion,

> We flee the police or immigration into the forest, farm fields, or bamboo forest. (FGD 1)

> Whenever we see the helicopter flying around the town, it means that the police from Bangkok or immigration will be patrolling, or checking the migrants soon. (FGD 1)

Migrants report that over time they develop a certain level of experience responding to challenges of these kinds, testifying to their prevalence in migrant communities. According to one worker,

> I have a lot of experience handling security problems, like when Thai officials or drug addicts enter the factory during the employer's absence... For me the most scary people are the drug addicts. (SID 1)

At another focus group, factory workers discussed moving in groups rather than individually, and coordinating not only with other migrants about impending crackdowns, but also with employers and members of local communities. This kind of coordination amounts to the maintenance of informal early warning systems.

> Our employer always keeps in touch with her friends by phone from the town, industry, and police station, getting updates of information regarding arrests from headquarters. (FGD 2)

> We also keep in touch with our friends in some factories and in the villages to get information, and after we get information we announce to our co-workers in the factories. (FGD 2)

Similar comments emerged in interviews and other focus groups, and in the surveys conducted for this research. However, this research elicited few comments on how migrants respond to and protect against personal insecurity within household settings (domestic violence, for example), and with respect to workplace harassment and abuse. As suggested in the previous section, comments on these topics were limited as a whole, not only in terms of responses, but also in terms of challenges. This situation aligns with other recent findings that suggest the difficulty of discussing these issues in migrant communities (see Aung and Aung 2009, Pollock and Aung 2010).

In this research, two women did offer some commentary on strained gender relations in migrant households. One frames foraging for vegetables in the forest as a strategy for maintaining a level of independence and security vis-à-vis her husband's meagre earnings and alcohol consumption - as well as an additional measure of support for her daughter's studies.

> I have three family members, and my husband is a construction worker who does not have regular work everyday. But he drinks everyday in the evening, so we fight with each other very often. My daughter is a student, and is studying at Grade 2. I go to the forest almost everyday to look for vegetables like bamboo shoots and other vegetables to send to the shop in the village. So I can make some money for food and for my child's pocket money. (FGD 1)

Another woman testifies to the limited options she has for protecting herself against her husband.

> My husband is a mason, and his daily wages are 150 baht per day. But he doesn't have a job everyday. He always drinks in the evening, so there is domestic violence in my house everyday. I am a piece worker who does not have any documents, so I face family problems everyday, but also livelihood problems. (FGD 3)

Indeed, previous research suggests options for limiting threats to personal security in precarious work settings can be few. In response to harassment or violence at one's workplace, some migrants have reported moving to a different employer or even returning to Burma. These responses require a degree of fluidity in local labour markets, as well as the maintenance of networks that enable cross-border movement in cases of emergency.

A plantation worker in Phang Nga offered the following comment.

> My ex-employer's brother raped one female worker when I was working for them. My employer did abortion for her. She went back to her village after that. She was so shy to report that case to a police. We cannot report to a police because we are Burmese. That is why I quitted my job. My uncle and aunt did not let me work there as well. (MAP 2010b: 19-20)

Additionally, a domestic worker in Mae Sot, whose movement is usually restricted to her employer's home, said,

> I also faced that problem [harassment]. In the absence of his [the employer's] wife, he ordered me to massage him, then he tried to touch my body parts, then I struggled and he gave up. (20)

For some workers, minimising exposure to violence and harassment from local authorities and Thai citizens simply means choosing not to leave one's home or workplace at certain times, or exercising caution - including travelling in groups, as noted previously - when moving around outside.

> We are afraid of the police and immigration in our community. We stay at home and do not go outside, because we are concerned for our safety. (FGD 3)

Concerns about local citizens also led migrants to comment on the need to move around with caution, in groups, or not at all.

> I was beaten by some young Thai-Karen citizens last month while I was on my way to Mae Sot. At first they stopped my bicycle and asked for a match. After they took my match they then asked for 10 baht. When I said I didn't have it, suddenly one of the boys hit me in the back, and the other one punched me in the face. I tried to run away so that they wouldn't hit me anymore. I was injured for a week. Now I am getting better, but I have to be careful when I go outside. And honestly, I only had two baht in my pocket. (FGD 2)

These various responses to issues of personal security raise a number of important themes: among them, the degree to which gender is an organizing factor, at times negatively, for the experience of migrant workers in the Mae Sot area, and Thailand more broadly; the ways in which 'security' actions by local authorities produce heightened forms of insecurity for migrant communities, even leading to violence and the death of migrant workers and their families; and the reality of workplaces

that offer little to no protection, legally, physically, or otherwise, from direct threats to individuals' persons.

Migrants' comments thus reveal that the following are among the strategies migrants use to protect themselves from challenges and threats relating to personal security.

- Limiting movement outside one's home or workplace
- Moving in groups outside one's home or workplace
- Choosing carefully when to leave one's home or workplace
- Moving to fields and forests when authorities raid factories and other workplaces
- Building and using informal warning systems to protect against crackdowns, raids, and the dangers to migrants' persons that result
- Use supplemental earnings as a means for limiting dependence on abusive partners
- Changing jobs or moving locations when a particular employer or working arrangement proves abusive and/or dangerous

Conclusion

In this discussion of self-protection strategies among migrant communities on the Thai-Burma border, this paper has moved among

several scales and discursive communities. At a translocal scale, migrants' Mae Sot-area responses to structural insecurities are legible within a broader movement whereby migration arises as dissent writ large vis-à-vis Burma's military power complex. At a recognizably more local scale, migrants' actions can be considered a condition of possibility for this more panoramic geography of protest, insofar as they carve out and, as best they can, maintain minimal subsistence standards within a highly precarious *mise-en-scene* of movement and mobility. Further, in their foregrounding of the impotence of conventional 'protection-sector' activities among humanitarian actors in the border area, these strategies highlight the need for a discursive transition from external interventionism to a renewed appreciation of the agency and autonomy of migrant communities.

Central to this reinterpretation of migrants' "everyday politics" has been James Scott's work around conceptualizing the daily practices of peasant communities in Southeast Asia. In a time of both advancing neo-liberalism and protracted market instability, Scott's decades-old reading of peasants' responses to destructive changes in state- and market-based forms of power, at the heart of which is an appeal to a politicized ethic of subsistence, retains a great deal of relevance for contemporary Southeast Asia. At issue, however, may be the thorny question of scale.

In a particularly perceptive engagement with Scott's work, Mark Edelman (2005) has argued that, in the context of neoliberal political integration since the time of Scott's studies in the 1970s and 1980s,

peasant resistance to state and market failures (such as in the work of La Via Campesina) has demonstrated the value of internationalized response, as international finance now proves more actively detrimental to peasant communities than nation-states. In his response, Scott respectfully disagrees, noting the logic of such a scaling up, but cautioning as well that, in his analysis, it may be national-level struggles, at a comparatively localized scale, that provide the best traction for resistance to transnational neoliberalism (Scott 2005: 397-398). Scott's reminder of the salience of state-based forms of power recalls a broad strain elsewhere in social research that has questioned once-dominant claims about the retreat of state-based sovereignty in an age of transnational flows. Aihwa Ong, for example, has continually stressed the need to remain sensitive to mutations in state power and sovereignty, since rather than homogenizing exploitation in neoliberal milieus, transnational capital has instead produced highly variegated effects according, in no small part, to states' differential engagements with capital flows and international finance (see Ong 2003, 2006, and 2007).

Albeit elaborated in very different contexts in the social sciences, the various writings of Scott and Ong return us to the need to understand exploitation and the possibility of response at relatively localized levels. This project takes on greater urgency in the post-2008 world of sustained instability in global markets, which in leftist public commentary has been conceived variously as systemic structural crisis (Wallerstein 2010), a "permanent economic emergency" (Zizek 2010), the "protracted long downturn of late capitalism" (Balakrishnan 2010), and the settling of a "Crisis 2.0" world where no serious re-examination of fundamentals has

taken place (Blackburn 2011). Instead, we can continue to expect austerity for the North, and structural adjustment for the South (Burawoy 2010, Wahl 2012). Against this uniquely inauspicious backdrop, Burma's military-led government is pushing for rapid and thorough market liberalization, while Thailand's pursuit of regional economic integration on neoliberal grounds has returned to the top of Thai policy agendas after the Puea Thai election victory.On the Thai-Burma border, then, the basic structural dynamics of the race to the bottom remain very much in place, with the reality of exploitation and insecurity if anything deepening or accelerating rather than stabilizing or slowing down. In this context, a moral economy reading of migrants' responses to increasingly precarious working and living conditions offers a range of analytical innovations: a centring of subsistence needs in the calculus of exploitation, an understanding of resistance and response as appeals to minimal communal standards, a renewed investment in the agency of migrants vis-à-vis humanitarian misconceptions, a (re)politicization of the small acts that, together, open up the possibility of mobility and migration as vast forms of protest against the crippling poverty and long-standing political repression of Burma's military power complex.

Of course, it would surely be a mistake to see the seeds of an epochal Polanyian counter-movement in the everyday self-protection actions of border-area migrant communities. Still worse would it be to over-romanticize or unduly idealize resilience when the machinery of exploitation has accelerated in the context of systemic crisis. However, locally scaled readings of *what migrants do to get by* may be valuable not for some abstract notion of the romance of resistance, but rather

for the profoundly materialist understanding they offer vis-à-vis the empirical reality of how migrants not only withstand structural exploitation, but even carve out the possibility of communal subsistence within one particularly neoliberal milieu. This is the tangible stuff of daily exploitation and everyday responses - support for which, perhaps it need not be said, will only become more vital with the persistence of instability in global markets. That migrants' actions represent, as it were, the labour of survival rather than an overt politics of dissent may be peripheral to the accumulation of change over time. As with George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*, what we have here is a commonwealth outside, on the ground, shaping the building blocks of another world.

Endnotes

1 Scott's work on the issue provides good summary of this relevant secondary literature. See Scott 1985 (245), Scott 2009, and the earlier noted Adas 1981.

2 Discussion of economic reforms has been extensive. See for example Pavin 2011, International Crisis Group [ICG] 2012, and myriad journalistic reporting.

3 The notion that we are living in a sustained global downturn has become something of a commonplace among public commentators on the left. See the conclusion of this paper for some discussion of this proposition.

4 Key notation includes in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and survey IDs (SIDs). See References 2: Primary Research at the end of this paper.

5 Sources here are too numerous to list, but see Sciortino and Punpuing 2009, and KHRG 2009.

6 See South et al 2010b for a brief account of protection discourse in humanitarian affairs.

7 MAP has also sought to highlight the voices of people from Burma in these debates. See for example MAP 2010a (28-29).

8 See also Crosby 2006, a paper for Inter-Pares that discusses how categorizations of people who move are 'inherently racialized, classed and gendered' (MAP 2010a: 69).

9 For basic information about the migrant situation in the Mae Sot area, see MAP Foundation 2006, Arnold 2007, Kusukabe 2008, and Aung and Aung 2009.

10 Mae Tao sub-district is an area outside of Mae Sot where, over the years, many migrants have come to live. Some of the largest factories in the Mae Sot area are in this sub-district, though there are extensive fields and plantations as well, such that agricultural workers live in this area too. For areas within 10-20 kilometers of Mae Sot, this mixture of factories and agriculture is common (Mae Tao Mai, another area considered to be a major location for factories, also features many agricultural workers who work in fields in the area). Yet for both and similar places, the distance to Mae Sot is far enough – and usually requires passing through at least one checkpoint – that seeking treatment more locally, outside of Mae Sot, makes more sense than traveling into Mae Sot.

11 See Aung and Aung 2009 for a brief description of the centrality of overtime hours to migrants' economic stability.

12 See MAP 2010b for a more in-depth treatment of workplace harassment and abuse.

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Primary Research

Note: the sources cited below do not comprise the total research conducted in this study. While all interviews, focus groups, and surveys have been taken into account for the purposes of this paper's analysis, only some sources have been directly cited in the paper. These are the sources reflected below. The structure of these citations should be self-evident, but it may be worth noting that when 'Mae Sot' appears in a citation, it reflects a reference to the municipality, not the district. Other locations cited below refer to sub-districts within Mae Sot district, with the exception of Mae Tao Clinic, which is near Mae Sot municipality, and Tak, which is the provincial capital of Tak Province.

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)

IDI 1: factory worker, female, undocumented, Mae Tao Mai, 02/10/10.

IDI 2: health worker, male, documented, Mae Sot, 24/09/10.

IDI 4: community worker, female, documented, Mae Sot, 24/09/10.

IDI 5: agricultural worker, male, undocumented, Mae Tao Mai, 02/10/10.

IDI 6: piece worker, male, undocumented, Mae Tao Mai, 02/10/10.

IDI 8: domestic worker, female, undocumented, Mae Tao, 14/10/10.

IDI 9: piece worker, female, undocumented, Mae Tai Clinic, 14/10/10.

IDI 10: agricultural worker, male, undocumented, Mae Tao Mai, 02/10/10.

IDI 11: piece worker, female, undocumented, Mae Pa, 14/10/10.

IDI 12: agricultural worker, female, undocumented, Mae Tao Mai, 02/10/10.

IDI 13: construction worker, female, undocumented, Mae Pa, 06/10/10.

IDI 15: construction worker, male, undocumented, Mae Pa, 06/10/10.

IDI 20: agricultural worker, male, undocumented, Mae Tao Mai, 02/10/10.

IDI 21: construction worker, male, undocumented, Mae Tao Mai, 02/10/10.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGD 1: construction workers, mixed gender, mixed documentation, Mae Pa, 15/10/10.

FGD 2: factory workers, mixed gender, mixed documentation, Mae Ku, 13/10/10.

FGD 3: mixed sector, women only, mixed documentation, Mae Tao, 12/10/10.

Survey Results (Survey ID: SID)

SID 1: sector n/a, male, undocumented, location n/a, 10/10.