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between Thailand and Its Neighbors 1

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Tatsuki Kataoka²

1. Introduction

This paper aims to report the dynamics of migration of the hill tribes in Thailand over the past decades. Taking data from a case study of a Lahu community, I will discuss the relationship between the state and hill minorities, as well as recent changes in their migration patterns.

Debate regarding the cross-border migration of the hill tribes in mainland Southeast Asia has stressed their statelessness and freedom from state control, and these features are supposed to originate in their practice of shifting cultivation [cf. Scott 2009]. The implication of such a line of thinking is that they are considered to be free mountain dwellers ignorant of state boundaries, or innocent “indigenous people” of the uplands who go on regardless of the state boundaries demarcated by the lowland people.

However, such ideas of the “statelessness” and “freedom” of the hill tribes might be one-sided and oversimplified. According to Jonsson [2005], throughout their history, the hill peoples of mainland Southeast Asia (and Southern China) have never been free from state control. In this sense the difference between the past and present is no more than a matter of ways with which to negotiate with state authorities. Culas [2000] makes a distinction between the micro migration (small-scale allocation of hamlets) and macro migration (large-scale migration across state boundaries) of the Hmong in China, Vietnam, Laos and Siam. He shows that macro or cross-national migration of the Hmong has been determined with national and international politics in this area in the 19th and 20th Centuries firmly in consideration.

Of course, the fact that their movements have been influenced by state power does not mean that these have always been in “formal” and “legal” forms, in terms of modern national politics.

Abraham and van Schendel [2005] point out two levels of legitimacy, that is, “legal” (state’s legitimacy) and licit (local people’s legitimacy). Indeed we might add that these two domains sometimes contradict each other. According to this idea, activities of

¹ I would like to appreciate the G-COE project “In Search of Sustainable Humanosphere in Asia and Africa” to provide an opportunity to print this working paper.

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borderland societies often fall into a category of “licit but illegal”, whereas those of ideal states are supposed to be “licit and legal”.

In this paper I will focus my attention on such aspects in the history of Lahu migration from Burma to Northern Thailand and further to Bangkok, Southern Thailand and other countries, so that we can understand their migration in relation to state power.

The following discussion is mainly based on my field research in a Lahu Christian village (Village M) in Chiang Rai Province (Mae Suai District). My research has been conducted from 1999 up to the present.

2. Migration of the Lahu Christians and International Politics

2-1. Until 1950's

The mass conversion of the Lahu to Christianity occurred in Kengtung (Burma) in 1904, three years after an American Baptist missionary William Young opened his evangelical station there. This movement rapidly spread into Chinese territory. In 1920, new evangelical station was opened in Bana in Southwestern Yunnan. This Bana station was a branch of Kengtung, and the converts continued to belong to Burma's Baptist Church until 1949.

After the Communist Revolution in China in 1949, some Lahu Christians started to leave Chinese territory after their failed uprising (with remaining KMT troops) against communist rule.

According to the founders of Village M, they also engaged in anti-communist uprisings during 1949-51 together with the KMT's “Yunnan Anti-communist National Salvation Army”, “Li Xiangzhang (district officer of Bana area)” and Vincent Young (William's son), and after that they fled to the Burmese borderland and eventually settled in villages around Kengtung, Shan State.

Simultaneously, the first migration of the Lahu Christians to Thailand occurred in 1954 led by another group. Harold Young called for them to settle in Mae Taeng District of Chiang Mai Province to work in Cha Raming's plantation. Harold was another son of William and was ousted from Burma after independence. After he moved to Chiang Mai, he became involved in the CIA's activities to train Lahu intelligence workers who were sent to the Burma-Yunnan borderlands. Some of the migrants are reported to have been employed by the KMT military unit even after they had moved onto Thai soil.

2-2. 1960's

The KMT troops who occupied the hill areas of the Shan State of Burma were attacked by the joint operations of Burmese and Chinese armies in 1960, and some of them fled over to the Thai side of the borderline. “Li Xiangzhang” was among them.

He and the Lahu Christians under his command were based at “Xin Cun (New Village)” at the foot of Doi Tung (a mountain near the Mae Sai border checkpoint). They left their families there, and were sent on a mission to Huai Sai and Nam Ta in Laos as part of CIA intelligence activities. During this period they moved back and forth between Thailand and Laos, carrying opium as a side job.

In Burma in the 1960’s, “Law Caw” was a leader of the Lahu Christians around Kengtung. He was born in China and escaped from the communist regime in the 1950’s, and after moving to Kengtung he became a commander of KKY, a village paramilitary unit. Many old villagers around Village M, including my host family’s household head, were formerly his soldiers and their most important mission was to support their own logistics, that is, through the earnings of an armed caravan trade to Tha Chi Lek (Burma’s border town across Mae Sai) for the purpose of selling opium.

2-3. 1970’s

The CIA intelligence unit of “Li Xiangzhang” was dissolved at the beginning of 1970’s, when the United States’ “secret war” in Indochina came to an end. With this development Li planned to establish a new permanent village on the top of Doi Tung, and called upon their brethren in Burma to move in. At that time the Lahu in Shan State were suffering from the expansion of the Communist Party of Burma, who marched from the Burma-Yunnan borderland into Eastern Shan State, and with this the KKY commander Law Caw decided to respond to Li’s invitation in Dec. 1973. Law Caw and his soldiers led their villagers and departed secretly for Doi Tung. They walked in the forest after dark and took rest in the forest during the daytime, so that Burmese government troops could not discover them. Finally they reached Thai territory on 13 Dec. Their armed migration went unpunished by the Thai authority, and they celebrated their successful exodus (called “*aw mo lon*”) to the new land by means of a special Christmas mass meeting on the first Sunday after their arrival.

However, Law Caw’s group started to move on again to another place within a few years of the *aw mo lon* because of land scarcity and growing government pressure concerning land use around Doi Tung, and eventually they resettled in Village M and its surrounding mountains in Mae Suai District in 1978. Village M was once occupied by KMT troops (3rd Army) in the 1960’s and a dissident faction among them joined Krating Daeng, another anti-communist paramilitary group and ousted the mainstream KMT group from the village in 1978. Then the Chinese commander of Krating Daeng called for the Lahu of Doi Tung to establish a new village there, and Law Caw’s group decided to take up his invitation. However, at the beginning of the 1980’s the KMT 3rd Army came back to attack Village M and defeated the Krating Daeng group. As the winner of this conflict, the commander of the 3rd Army unit of Village M took hold of land ownership around the village. This land ownership has been accepted by the

local people even after the KMT army of the village was disarmed by Thai government authorities in 1988, and even though all the lands surrounding Village M were officially national property.

Many old men among the founders' group repeatedly expressed that they abandoned their paddy fields and waterbuffaloes in China and again in Kengtung. Their statements can be probed when we refer to the research report on their original villages in China in the 1950's. The research conducted by the Communist Party discovers that in the villages where they lived in China the dominant pattern of land use was based on wet rice cultivation with minor rotation farming on the slopes surrounding the paddy. This means that their migration in 1950-70's is by no means a product of slash-and-burn pioneer farming, but their adaptation to the specific political environment. During the Cold War period, the Thai government covertly welcomed armed anti-communist groups to settle in the Northern border areas. Even though the migration of the Lahu Christians violated national law and national sovereignty, it was still beneficial for both sides.

3. Migration after 1980's

The history of Village M mentioned above is a history told by the village founders' group. Actually many of the founders ran away from Village M after the victory of the KMT in the 1980's. Once the population of the Lahu hamlets declined, and new comers from Burma joined to supplement it. Indeed, the Lahu migration flow did not cease after the event of mass migration in 1973.

Table 1 shows that the newcomer group is becoming the majority and new migration flows have continued until 1998, only one year before I began participant observation there.

Looking closely at their migratory history enables us to appreciate that the direction of this human flow is not always one-sided (Burma to Thailand; North to South). 4 out of 7 households which settled in 1987 once joined *aw mo lon* in 1973 to migrate from Kengtung to Doi Tung, and a few years later they left Thailand and returned to Burma. Then finally they decided to move to Thailand again and settled in Village M where their relatives live. Another household head who migrated to Village M in 1994 had been formerly settled there since 1983. In 1993 he visited the Shan State to marry a local Lahu woman, and he spent one year in Burma for bride service according to Lahu custom before he returned to Village M to form his own independent household.

Some participants of *aw mo lon* went back further North. One pastor who now lives in China shares a common migratory history with the founders of Village M, i.e. from Yunnan to Kengtung (1950's) and from Kengtung to Doi Tung (1973). However, he returned to Kengtung in the 1970's and finally settled in his parents' village in China in

1982.

We should note that all aspects of such migrations were illegal in a strict sense. Of course the occupation of borderlands by an armed group coming from a neighboring country is illegal. Furthermore, at that time they did not have passports and national ID cards. Actually their land ownership and the status of village itself were also illegal. Even in 1999 when I started to conduct fieldwork only 11 households had Thai nationality and most of the others had no formal nationality. But almost all of the villagers (with the exception of 5 households) declared themselves to have been “born in Chiang Rai Province (Thailand)” in government records. In a sense this declaration was also illegal in terms that this did not reflect reality. The most conventional way in for the newcomers in the 1980-90’s was to get a border pass at the Mae Sai border checkpoint, which is issued to the locals and valid for only one day. Furthermore they would take a local bus to Chiang Rai, a provincial capital, and then on to Village M. If lucky they would not come across a policeman who was watching out for illegal Burmese migrants at a checkpoint on the way from the border to Chiang Rai, but sometimes it was possible that they got caught by the police there and were subsequently charged or sent back to Burma. Other well-informed migrants would go up to a relative’s village on the mountain immediately after they entered Thailand and make a detour to the provincial capital.

These are typically “licit-but-illegal” ways of border crossing and these are also applied to short time visits between Burma and Thailand. It seems that such a “licit-but-illegal” nature of migration originates with the peoples’ “illegal” status and these two aspects intensify each other. Illegal migrants become people without nationality, and people without nationality are forced to cross borders illegally when they want to visit relatives living on the other side of the borderline.

Of course, it is possible to cross a border legally but only if we have a passport. This tendency is becoming especially intense in recent years. The pastor and a few other villagers of Village M now visit Burma annually with their passports by car or airplane to visit relatives, and this has been almost exceptional to the 20th Century. Leaders of the Lahu Christians in Thailand have also made an annual visit to their brethren in China since the 1990’s, and their trips are no longer illegal. Another pastor in China, whom I already mentioned above, revisited Thailand in the previous year for the purpose of conducting evangelical work. He obtained a Thai visa for visiting relatives and took a passenger boat connecting Jinghong (China) and Chiang Saen (Thailand) along the Mekong River. Following on from this he traveled to Lahu villages in Thailand over a period of 2 months before returning to China.

4. Migration to the Lowland

4-1. Changes in Village M in past ten years

Within the ten years in which I have been conducting fieldwork, the social life of Village M has changed dramatically. These changes include the spread of electricity, mobile-phones and motorbikes, all of which were found only rarely in the village a decade ago. Another aspect in this regard is the “legalization” of the villagers’ status. ID cards (with Thai nationality) were issued to most of the villagers with only a few exceptions in 2003, and their land ownership has also been approved officially since 2006. This change in particular has transformed the villagers’ status from “licit-but-illegal” to “licit-and-legal”. However in these processes many villagers went into debt. Although the majority of the villagers have made a false return to be Thai-born, it is still necessary to pay some amount of money to accelerate the procedure. It is said that the bribe needed is 10,000 Baht, and it can be more expensive if one has already declared the truth (i.e. having been born in Burma) and asks government officials to “rewrite” the place of birth. Official recognition of land ownership also required money, since they had to buy land from the former KMT warlord who claimed ownership over all of the land around the village. All of these new phenomena led to a rapid and serious increase in the villagers’ demand for cash.

4-2. Increasing labor migration

“Becoming a Thai citizen” means that you can travel anywhere you wish. Formerly the villagers’ travel was formally restricted (if one has no nationality) within a province without the special permission of the government. This fact made migration to the cities in other provinces somewhat risky, for this could lead to one’s repatriation “to Burma (!)” if one is suspected of being Burma-born at a police checkpoint. In 1999 when I first visited Village M there was only one villager working outside the village (at a shrimp farm in the South). In contrast to this the results of my research in 2007 and 2009 show (table 2) that labor migration is now quite common. Out of 35 households and 181 household members, over 30 men and women continually work in the lowland for wage labor. In table 2, the majority of those who go to Chiang Mai are farm laborers in suburban villages, while they tend to work as factory workers, shopkeepers, or laborers of other tertiary industries in Bangkok. Regarding the case of the South, migrants work at shrimp farms in Krabi and rubber plantations in Betong. Those who go to Taiwan are contract laborers in factories. Among the labor migrants, table 2 shows that one third of them have returned to the village after short-term labor service, one third of them have changed working place in the lowland, and another one third of them have remained at the same place. This has meant that labor migration to the lowland has not yet directly resulted in the continual depopulation of the village. Nonetheless migration to Betong, the Southernmost district of Yala Province, is

remarkably large in terms of scale (both husband and wife go together and sometimes their Children also leave the village) and long in terms of period (they tend to stay for years).

4-3. An irony in establishing a permanent village

Labor migration when accompanied by one's spouse and children does not always mean that the migrant will no longer return to the village. In Village M, we came across new houses without residents. All the owners of these houses are currently working in Betong. For the villagers, rubber plantations in Betong are regarded as good places to make money, since each person can expect to earn tens of thousands of Baht monthly. Therefore, the villagers tend to go to Betong when they make a large sum investment. Such investments are made to purchase paddy fields or for the renewal of houses, both of which sometimes cost over 100 thousand Baht.

Here is a figure to demonstrate the increasing investments being made in land for a more stable agricultural sector. In 1999 there were only 9 households (out of 35) who owned paddy fields. But in 2009, the number of households who owned paddy increased to 25.

Formerly houses of the Lahu were rebuilt annually, this was due to the simple structure of houses and because materials could be easily obtained from the forests nearby. Recently however, this custom has been declining in popularity. After the long period of migration, villagers from village M seem to have decided to establish a permanent base for their livelihood there. Paddy fields are purchased and new houses are built, and then the owners are forced to leave the village for a number of years so that they can pay back their debt. It is ironic that the people are leaving the village in order to make a more permanent village with more permanent houses and fields.

5. Conclusion

People who have lived along borderlands for a long period of time are the people who are most conscious of state boundaries and state power. It is somewhat puzzling that this quite natural assumption has sometimes been ignored in the discussion on the "hill tribes". In the first half of this paper I have demonstrated that the migration history of the Lahu of Village M has been a direct manifestation of modern international politics in the domain of "licit-but-illegal". Following on from the Cold War, the political environment surrounding borderland societies in GMS countries is changing rapidly. The formerly "licit-but-illegal" domain has been, in some aspects and to some extent, transformed to become "licit-and-legal", and this recent transformation itself generates entirely new patterns of migration. One of the typical examples is the "labor migration boom" and increasing investments into village farm land and housing. Here we find a

new irony in this history of migration, namely “leaving the village in order to live in the village permanently”.

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Table 1: The Migratory history of each household in Village M (as of 1999)

Year	Number of households
1978	13
1979	1
1983	4
1985	3
1987	7
1990	2
1991	3
1992	4
1993	1
1994	3
1995	1
1997	1
1998	1
n.d.	5
total	49

Table 2: Absent villagers (for purposes of education or work)

House no.	Villager no.	2007	2009
1	3	Lowland school	Lowland school
2	6	Chiang Mai	Bangkok
3	14	Bangkok	<i>Village</i>
4	21	Taiwan	<i>Village</i>
4	22	<i>Village</i>	Lowland school
5	25	South (Krabi)	Malaysia
5	26	Bangkok	Chiang Mai
7	32	Chiang Mai	Moved out for marriage
7	33	Bangkok	<i>Village</i>
7	34	Chiang Mai	<i>Village</i>
7	35	<i>Village</i>	Bangkok
7	37	Chiang Mai	Bangkok
9	47	Lowland school	Bangkok
9	48	<i>Village</i>	Chiang Mai
13	60	South (Krabi)	Bangkok
13	61	Lowland school	Lowland school
14	66	Bangkok	Chiang Mai
14	67	Bangkok	Military service
14	68	Bangkok	Chiang Mai
15	72	Bangkok	Taiwan
17	80	South (Betong)	<i>Village</i>
18	88	<i>Village</i>	Taiwan
19	95	Bangkok	Bangkok
19	96	Bangkok	Bangkok
19	97	<i>Village</i>	Bangkok
20	100	Bangkok	Bangkok
20	101	Lowland school	<i>Village</i>
21	104	South (Betong)	South (Betong)
21	105	South (Betong)	South (Betong)
21	106	South (Betong)	South (Betong)
21	107	South (Betong)	South (Betong)
21	108	South (Betong)	South (Betong)
22	109	<i>Village</i>	Chiang Mai
22	111	<i>Village</i>	Lowland school
23	113	South (Betong)	South (Betong)

23	114	South (Betong)	South (Betong)
25	126	Bangkok	<i>Village</i>
25	128	<i>Village</i>	Bangkok
25	129	Lowland school	Lowland school
26	132	Chiang Mai	Chiang Mai
26	133	Lowland school	Lowland school
26	134	Lowland school	Lowland school
27	135	South (Betong)	<i>Village</i>
27	137	South (Betong)	<i>Village</i>
29	147	South (Krabi)	<i>Village</i>
29	148	<i>Village</i>	Lowland school
29	149	Lowland school	Lowland school
29	151	<i>Village</i>	Lowland school
31	156	<i>Village</i>	Chiang Mai
31	161	Chiang Mai	<i>Village</i>
33	171	Bangkok	Bangkok
34	172	<i>Village</i>	South (Betong)
34	173	<i>Village</i>	South (Betong)
34	174	South (Krabi)	South (Betong)
34	175	<i>Village</i>	South (Betong)
34	176	<i>Village</i>	South (Betong)
34	177	<i>Village</i>	South (Betong)
35	178	South (Betong)	South (Betong)
35	179	South (Betong)	South (Betong)

Out of 35 households, 181 household members,

The number of those who went for wage labor: 33 (21 households, 2007), 32 (20 households, 2009)

The number of absent villagers for education: 11 (2007) ; 16 (2009)

The number of returnees from labor migration in 2009: 10

The number of those who were in the village in 2007 and left for work in 2009: 11

The number of those who changed working places during 2007 and 2009: 10