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## **Construct of a Cross-Border Community *in-between* the Thailand and Myanmar's Border Space through Cross-Border Movements of Ethnic Traders**

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Received 23 May 2017; Received in revised form 2 October 2017

Accepted 30 January 2018; Available online 7 March 2018

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigated the making of a cross-border community Myanmar's ethnic traders between the Thailand-Myanmar border exploring the interconnection of their cross-border mobility, network and illegal/illicit components of commodities. The border towns of *Mae Sai*, Thailand's northernmost town, and *Tachilek*, Myanmar's eastern town, witnessed dynamic transformation under regional development. The border trade and tourism booms drew Myanmar's ethnics from Myanmar hinterland to *Tachilek*, before then crossing the borders to *Mae Sai* in quest of economic well-being. Having had experienced high levels of business competition in *Tachilek*, these migrant traders, made up of the *Burmese*, *Shan*, *Burmese Chinese* and *Burmese Muslim*, crossed the borders to sell pirated CD/DVDs, smuggled brand-name cigarettes and *Viagra* to tourists in *Mae Sai*. This paper argued that the ethnic traders' border tactics-those derived from the everyday cross-border mobility taken place between *Mae Sai-Tachilek*, and based on manipulation of the states' regulatory cross-border loopholes-contributed to the creation of a cross-border community. The community-embedded in, and demonstrated through, daily spatial and socio-economic interrelation between the two borders-was a hybridized, divisive, yet integrative border space. Their community in -between the borders helped them create new opportunities and new profits. The in-between state borders were re-defined, re-functioned and given a new meaning in their own right. This paper was qualitative research and its research tools included research papers, observation and in-depth interviews.

### **Keywords**

Thailand-Myanmar Borders, *Mae Sai*, *Tachilek*, CD Sellers, Cross-Border Community

## Introduction

A space is not neutral but contested. Within the new spatio-socio-economic context, the Thailand-Myanmar border becomes a contested space in which people of different backgrounds and ethnicities co-exist and interact with one another. This has contributed to more tension on spatial shifts than ever before because of emerging constellation of the differentials, encounters and resistances in the everyday space of the border. To put it another way, the Thailand-Myanmar border is characterized as a space, being produced out of the interplay of migrant people and geographical space, amidst wider political and socio-economic contexts (Massey, 2007).

Nowadays, the border towns of *Mae Sai*, (Thailand's northern-most border town sharing an international border with Myanmar), and *Tachilek*, (Myanmar' eastern border town), once considered an ethnic-armed struggle areas, have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the speed and scale of cross-border trade, as well as in increase in cross-border mobility and population diversity level, and all within regional development contexts. This has drawn a number of Myanmar's ethnic people from its hinterlands to *Tachilek*, before crossing the border to *Mae Sai* in search of economic well-being. While the primary source of newcomers in both *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek* was Myanmar's ethnic cross-border people, the majority of people who had already lived in the areas were the locals. While the former represented cross-border migrants, the latter were part of an established community.

The migration of these ethnic traders from Myanmar into Thailand created the condition for an 'in-between border community' to emerge. It was a community on the move in between- the borders, which was totally different from traditional communities. To sum up, their cross-border community was constructed out of the interaction with commodities, opportunities and borderlines, and the way they negotiated with, and accommodated to, the two state borders. The study made a contribution to the field of border studies by shedding a light on an under-studied border community.

## Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research paper was qualitative research. It employed ethnographic approaches including such research tools as in-depth interviews and field observation. Concerning in-depth interviews, there were totally six different cases: (i) seven individual ethnic CD sellers, (ii) three NGO workers assisting vulnerable ethnic minorities and ethnic women sex-workers, (iii) one Buddhist monk, (iv) one churchwarden in charge of overseeing *Mae Sai Market*, (v) two Thai immigration officers and (vi) one policeman. They represented major actors on the *Mae Sai* border. There was one focus group of six mixing ethnic traders, selling dried fruite, glass, snacks and toys. Moreover, field observation included immersion in *Mae Sai Border*

*Market*, observation at *Mae Sai-Tachilek* borders and general talks to a number of shop-owners, state - officers and petty traders, both Thais and ethnic people.

The theoretical framework subscribed to Massey's idea of 'Space' (2007). This theoretical framework served two objectives; first, to shape the research problem on how space was produced; and secondly, to analyze and interpret field-data.

### **Border Development Policy Contexts**

The recent arrival of Myanmar's ethnic petty traders in both the *Mae Sai Market* and *Tachilek Market* was the result of an assemblage of diverse social forces. Firstly, not until 1989 did the Burmese government officially launch its market reform policy. It brought about the open conduct of cross-border trade between the border towns of *Tachilek* and *Mae Sai*. In that year, the military made cease-fire agreements with a number of ethnic rebel groups including the *Wa* in *Shan State*, eastern Myanmar. Subsequently, the Burmese junta initiated the 'Border Area Development Programs' (BADP) (Kusakabe&Oo, 2007). This new program aimed to facilitate business growth and improve people's livelihoods. It drew a number of people from Myanmar hinterlands to the borderlands.

Secondly, the year 1998 also became a landmark year for the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) regional development programs such as 'Economic Quadrangle'. The border towns of *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek* were directed towards cross-border trade and tourism, and also modern infrastructure was built or improved. Linkage among towns in the areas was improved through networks of roads and also from the opening of airports. These changes helped facilitate the flows of people and goods across the border.

Thirdly, Myanmar had adopted an economic liberalization policy since 1993 which directly affected the agricultural sector. The Burmese junta imposed the '*padi tax*' (*Tarwun-Kyae-Sabar*) to execute the duty program<sup>1</sup> and land confiscation (Kusakabe&Oo, 2007). It caused economic hardship. Due to poverty, people were driven out of the agricultural villages in search of better economic livelihoods elsewhere. Some migrated to the borderland. Places such as *Tachilek* and *Mae Sai* where common destinations for job seekers and also served as a springboard to Thailand and places such as *Chiang Mai* or *Bangkok*.

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<sup>1</sup> This program was finally cancelled in 2003 (Kusakabe&Oo, 2007).

In AmpornJiratikorn's (2008; 2012) research on mobility and networks she argued that the recent influx of *Shan* ethnic groups from Myanmar who migrated from *Shan* State to seek jobs in *Chiang Mai* was based on their relationship with *Shan* media primarily in the forms of audio cassettes, video CDs and movies. The link between *Shan* migrants and mass media formed 'migrant public spheres.' Likewise, Appadurai (1996) argued that migration and media created 'diasporic public sphere' for migrant people living in *New York*. These two literatures demonstrated that; first and foremost, there was a new form of space; secondly, there was also a challenge to state borders, control and regulations; and lastly, these formed social network cutting across diverse places.

Regarding this specific case, Myanmar's ethnic traders depended on social networks in the first place. These people used kinship and friendship for their cross-border mobility and linkage. They had friends and/or relatives living in *Tachilek* and/or working in *Mae Sai*. The networks helped form the spatial-social route that linked Myanmar hinterlands to Thailand. These ethnic and kinship networks played a vital role in serving as a bridge linking between the two different places. As a result, cross-border mobility became an ordinary lived practice of these ethnic people, as they made their space or homes in a new land. These cross-border practices were constructed via mutual networks developed between an immigrant's homeland and the new host country. *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek* became sites of both in-and-out flows. A few Thai shop-owners in *Mae Sai Market* maintained

"now that the Thai Government had allowed for Non-Thai Citizen registration and issued 0 initial<sup>2</sup> ID cards for them, they transported their relatives for earning a living here. They did whatever jobs whether it be even small jobs. It seemed that they migrated and occupied the town since the last ten years."

### **Myanmar's Cross-border Ethnic Traders and the Construct of a Cross-border Community**

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<sup>2</sup>Non Thai Citizens with 0 initial ID cards are under a human right protection regime, according to UN Declaration for Human Rights, and can have access to basic necessities. However, they need to stay in designated areas.

With the advent of regional development programs, a number of Myanmar's ethnic traders have been increasing in *Mae Sai* since 2000. The arrivals of a number of these ethnic people also reflected the changing spatial and socio-economic conditions in *Mae Sai*. Myanmar's ethnic people now work across all sectors in this border town. This specific case was paid to a group of Myanmar's ethnic traders at *DoiWao Market* (*Mae Sai Market* including *DoiWao Market* and *SaiLom Joy Market*) where they worked as cross-border traders.

At the entrance to *DoiWao Market*, which was walking distance from Mae Sai Boundary Post and close to the Mae Sai Immigration Office, there was a group of Myanmar's cross-border ethnic petty traders who sold pirated CD/VCDs, smuggled brand cigarettes, and *Viagra* to tourists. Their number fluctuated greatly between twenty and thirty, and they were young, around eighteen to thirty years old. They were ethnically different; *Shan*, *Burmese*, and *Burmese Muslim*. These ethnic petty traders followed each other to *Mae Sai* and mostly got to know each other at *DoiWao Market*.

The majority of them came from *Shan State* such as *Muang Yong*, *Chiang Tung* or *Taunggyi*, but their families had moved to *Tachilek* when they were younger. They still remembered ethnic-armed struggles that took place at the border, and also the border closures. The lesser number of them moved to the border from Myanmar hinterlands such as *Yangon*, *Mandalay*, *Meiktila* in *Mandalay Region* and *Mawlamyine* in *Mon State*. Mostly, when living in their hometowns, they had heard about *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek* having a lot of tourists. This meant that the border would be better for making-money than their homes.

These ethnic people had once conducted petty trade in *Tachilek*, several years before moving to *Mae Sai*. They tried out different jobs before ending up as street vendors selling CD/DVDs. But, they had faced a lot of competition, as there were a lot of big CD/DVD shops there. Tourists were more likely to buy CD/ DVD directly from these shops. Furthermore, there were hundreds of street vendors who sold the same things at *Tachilek Market*. They sold CD/VCDs, brand-name cigarettes, *Viagra*, *Valium*, *Aphrodisiac*<sup>3</sup>, electric razors, playing cards and lighters. They put these items in baskets attached by strips onto their necks or backs. They usually pestered tourists, begging them to buy items, engaging

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<sup>3</sup> These prescription drugs were often fake, made of powder or chalk. Fake cigarettes were made of paper.

them in a rushed manner as the tourists entered *Tachilek Market*. Because their livelihoods depended on tourists, they encroached upon the tourist's private space, and the tourists were often annoyed by this encroachment. They were likely to offer sexual health products to male tourists, but other items like CDs/DVDs, toys or gadget to women. They competed and sometimes quarreled with each other when selling an item to a tourist. However, they could not make ends meet working as street vendors there.

Having faced poor living conditions, they decided to cross the borders every day to *Mae Sai* to sell pirated CDs/VCDs, cigarettes and *Viagra* to tourists. They used a *Border Pass*. They could meet a lot of tourists in *Mae Sai* before the tourists headed over to *Tachilek*. The locals in *Mai Sai Market* usually called these ethnic street vendors 'CD sellers' (*Kon-Khai CD*). They also considered themselves to be primarily CD sellers.

At 08:00 AM, these ethnic CD sellers usually began waiting for customers in front of the entrance to *DoiWao Market*; some of them sometimes went to *SaiLom Joy Market*. They left their homes in *Tachilek* and crossed the border to *Mae Sai* every day, carrying with them ten to twenty CD/DVDs. They got a wholesale price at the CD/DVDs shops in *Tachilek*, then sold them at retail price in *Mae Sai Market*. They also acted as wholesalers selling items to frequent customers in *Mae Sai* such as van drivers. An individual wholesaler had about ten frequent customers who came to buy CD/DVDs, selling them on elsewhere.

CD/DVDs are a popular item among tourists because they are cheap and easily available at *DoiWao Market* and *SaiLom Joy Market*, and this makes *Mae Sai* a charming border town in the eyes of the tourists. Tourists can choose a variety of CD/DVDs: movies, TV series, Hollywood action, drama, porn, concert, MP3 songs and so-on. Generally speaking, the Thai tourists favored pop songs, recently released movies or *Korean Series*. If the sellers could make a little profit, they would sell. They were sometimes got angry with tourists who bargained too much and then walked away, while at other times the tourists made fun of them because they speak Thai with a strange accent.

They also sold brand-name cigarettes such as *Marlboro*. Thai cigarettes were available but much cheaper. They also sold *Viagra*. Due to the fact that *Mae Sai* is a narcotic prone-area, they themselves avoided taking *Viagra* across the border through the *Mae Sai Boundary Post*; as they might be checked by the authorities. But, they relied on a third party or intermediary to transport the *Viagra* across the border, before picking it up at *Mae Sai*

*Market*. Likewise, porn CD/DVDs movies were also transported across the borders through the use of intermediaries.

The intermediaries could be friends or a shop's employee in *Tachilek*. Apparently, the businesses in *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek* require the use of third party or intermediaries to help smooth business operations. At the borders, not only do they provide a link between suppliers and customers, but also they integrate the legal-illegal border business activities.

Legality and illegality were always part of the people's daily lives as they went through the border economy experience. They never considered themselves smugglers, but simply business people conducting normal commercial activities. They conceived the reality of the border from ground level through their everyday life trading practices, and saw this as different from the state's reality. Through the eyes of the state, their activities were considered part of a subversive economy, simply because the state could not completely control those who moved along the border. Moreover, the state could not impose taxes on these mobile people.

They got back home in *Tachilke* at 5:00 PM. Their every day schedule was aligned with the Mae Sai Boundary Post's opening and closing times. The CD sellers who migrated from Myanmar's hinterlands rented a row of houses in *Tachilek*. The row consisted of one story houses with small rooms, and could accommodate their family members. Each home only had a bed and cabinet. The space was used for living, eating, watching TV, and sleeping. They cooked food and washed clothes in the backyard outside the house. Outside were also shared restrooms. They sometimes quarreled with the neighbors over the borrowing and lending of money. They also called home sometimes to talk to their family members living faraway, after which it felt like a real family.

During the winter months and festivals, which included New Year, Chinese New Year and *Songkran*, it was high season, so they could make a lot of money from tourists. An individual earned 6,000 to 7,000 *baht* (187-218 USD) a month in the low season but as much as 10,000 to 12,000 *baht* (312-375 USD) in the high season. On a bad day, they went back home empty-handed. Time seemingly ran inconsistently over the course of a year because their time depended on the tourists' favorite seasons. That is, during winter, the time ran quick because there were a lot of tourists and the sales turn-over rate was high. In contrast, during the rainy season, time ran slowly because there were few tourists and sales were not good.

For a few years, *Mae Sai* was so quiet it was as if time-space had got stuck. These ethnic traders blamed the prolonged political protesters in *Bangkok* for the worsening of tourism in *Mae Sai*. A Thai women shop owner explained, “*The national political problem affected the whole economy, and unavoidably affecting tourism at Mae Sai. There were not so many tourists today as in several previous years. There were tourists who visited the town, but did not spend money, just window shopped.*” In such a scenario, while the *Bangkok* political crisis space was getting larger, the *Mae Sai* tourism space was shrinking.

The CD sellers’ time was tied to, and depended on, tourists’ leisure time. The rhythm of time ran fast, slow or even came to a standstill. In short, time had both connective and subjective dimensions. That is, it was grounded in, or subject to, interrelations between spatial events linked through an economic activity and through a particular group of people, in relation to their experiential and perceptual standpoints. Time-space is an integrative social entity (Brickell&Datta, 2011).

Looking at the big picture, selling CD/ DVDs was comparatively a more advantageous occupation than other jobs such as being a worker and/ or servant. For example, some of them used to be construction workers in *Tachilek* and got paid 200 *baht* (6 USD) a day; some were exploited labors with little wage payment or without pay. Others used to sell copycats such as *Ray-Ban* sunglasses, earning 200 to 400 *baht* (6-12 USD) a day in *Mae Sai*.

They now had relative freedom and could earn money every day. During the quiet rainy season, a few of them could do other work such as construction or selling street food. They could come back again during the high season. The CD selling job was flexible. Indeed, a lot of Myanmar’s ethnic petty traders who lived in *Tachilek* wanted to cross the border to sell CD/DVDs in *Mae Sai* because of the comparatively good income and the use of little capital. They could begin to trade with just 500 to 1,000 *baht* (15-31 USD), and this sum of money could be borrowed from relatives or neighbors. But, money was less important than language. They must be able to speak Thai.

There were more women than men doing this job; about seven women to only three men. A *Shan* woman CD seller said “*Previously there were many men, but they cheated money. The police arrested them and then they did not come back to sell again.*” Most of the women were married and had children. Women found the job easy, and they made more money than doing labor jobs. They earned money almost every day for their family. Besides



taking care of the household, their husbands and their children in *Tachilek*, they usually came to sell at *DoiWao Market*. Men were likely to find the job insecure. But, they were attracted by the relatively good money. Some of them were also married with kids; others were single. There were no couples doing the same job, as they were scared of having to run away from the police, or of being captured. So, the men left the jobs as soon as they found more secure jobs such as running a small business. If they were jobless or unsuccessful in their new jobs, they would come back again to make more money. Nonetheless, both the women and men were afraid of being put in jail for violating copyright laws or smuggling CD/DVDs. Some perceived this kind of job as transient; others had done it for several years, changing from kids, to teenagers and on to becoming married adults. A few *Burmese* CD sellers remarked, "We were feared. But, some could not do other jobs, others could make money from this job easily, and it was not a demanding job."

These CD sellers tried to present themselves as honest, polite and well-behaved in *Mae Sai*. Unlike ethnic street vendors who sold blank CD/DVDs, fake cigarettes and fake prescription drugs in *Tachilek*, and if this one did not cheat, that one would do, but in *Mae Sai* they did not pester or cheat customers. The customers could come to complain to them or to change their goods if they had a problem.

Their identity was relatively constructed via cutting between themselves in *Mae Sai* and those counterparts in *Tachilek* and between the old and new places. To put it simply, they used the stereotype of those street vendors in *Tachilek* to help highlight their identity in *Mae Sai*. Also, their new place in *Mae Sai* helped them re-construct a new identity; distancing them from their old habits in *Tachilek*. Certainly, they never admitted to having cheated customers in the past there. *DoiWao Market* became a part of their identity because their work provided them with a sense of belonging. Generally speaking, *Mae Sai* generated an important cultural meaning for the CD sellers in the borderland. They made their identity from their ability to leave *Tachilek*, as a point of departure from an old identity, and then worked in *Mae Sai*, as a point of entry to a new identity.

In *Mae Sai*, this particular group had its own selling place. They normally stood in front of a shop, asking passers-by to buy CD/DVDs. They were sometimes seen as a nuisance in the eyes of their neighbors because they got in the way of people shopping by occupying space in front of the shops. They also sometimes quarreled with each other. *DoiWao Community's* merchants were also sometimes disturbed when they ran away from the police, as they sought a place to hide. At these times, it was just like cat and mouse.

When the worst-case scenario happened, a shop owner would have to hide CD/ DVDs around his/her shop, or in the backyard drains of other people's houses. The shop owners were aware of these people. A Thai churchwarden said:

There were pirated CD/DVDs, smuggled drugs, copycat clothes, or anything illegal, there were all here, what you want? Inside the temple was also their place for selling stuffs, I often drove them away by scoldingvulgar words at them, otherwise they would not listen. If the police chased them, they had CD/DVDs, drugs hide [sic] in the temple. They brought me hell". He also yelled off " If the police seized me [churchwarden], I would kill you [CD sellers]". They disappeared once in a while and showed up again.

### **Playing Tactics on the Border**

Mae Sai Custom officers and Mae Sai police regularly cracked down on smuggled CD/DVDs at *Mae Sai Market*. For example, they arrested an estimate of twelve thousand CD/DVDs worth almost 3,000,000 *baht* (83,333 USD) over the first six months of 2007 (Mae Sai Custom Office, 2007). They arrested smuggled goods worth 30 million *baht* (833,333 USD) in 2006 (Mae Sai Custom Office, 2006). They also arrested prescription drugs worth 720,000 *baht* (17,560 USD) in 2012 (Chiang Rai On Time, 29 June 2012). It was generally estimated that pirated CD/DVDs and other copycat goods generated about 10,000,000 *baht* (4 million USD) daily (Komchadluek, 28 July 2004).

Allegedly, there were CD/DVDs factories in *Tachilek* owned by Thai businessmen. They were otherwise under the cooperation with Myanmar's people. Myanmar turned a blind eye to copyright laws (ASTV Manager Online, 2004), so the Thai businessmen took advantage of this border trade loophole. However, *Burmese CD sellers*<sup>4</sup> said " *the CD factories were owned by Thais. There must be Thai people getting involved in the business because they must know which songs or albums were popular and which movies or TV series were the talk of the town*". Another person confirmed, " *I heard Thai CD/DVDs were copied in Myanmar. The blank CD/DVDs were imported from Thailand. And, they stealthily put Thai songs and movies, something like that.*"<sup>5</sup> Also, a Thai NGO staff said, " *The CDs*

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<sup>4</sup> The interviewees also said "the CD/DVDs were reproduced in *Tachilek*; *Viagra* was imported from India and China" (Interview, February, 2, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Based on my fieldwork and documentary research, I could identify 3 major sources of pirated CD/DVDs. The first source was from China, e.g., Hollywood movie CD/DVDs with beautiful box sets; the second from Myanmar's border, e.g., Thai MP3 CDs; and the third from Bangkok, e.g., Thai movie and

must be reproduced in its country [Myanmar] because its country can sell illegal stuffs very freely' ." In fact, *Shan State's* business operations were partially embedded in a spatial autonomy. That is, the *Wahave* business autonomy and also control *United State Wa Army* (UWSA). Taking CD/DVDs factories as an example, a Thai businessman operated the business under the patronage of the *Wa*. The *Wa* had spatial autonomy, while the Thai Businessman had capital. This subversive economy inferred the existence of a cross-border business enterprise and also the presence of a cross-border network. *Mae Sai* also served as one re-distributive hub for these pirated CD/DVDs to Thailand elsewhere.

The social life of CD/DVDs complicated the local sphere with global space. Tourists who came to buy CD/DVDs at the border market helped set in motion a local-global circuit. *Tachilek*, as both a center and largest market of pirated entertainment products, has connections with the major trade routes on major border towns. *Tachilek* connects with *Muang Yon* (UWSA stronghold), and *Chiang Tung* (*Shan State's* major town) and *Muang La* (*Shan State* border town on the China border) to the north-east as well as *Xishuangbannain* southern China (Pongsawat, 2007). It also connects Myanmar with *Mae Sai* and *Chiang Khong* (*Chiang Rai's* port town) in northern Thailand and with *Huaisai* (*Bokaew's* port town) in western Laos (Walker, 1999; Manager, 30 May 2010). The former location involves an inland route; while the latter involves a *Mekong River* route. The original movies were brought from the US, then counterfeited and copied in Myanmar and China, after which they were transported along *R3A Highway* from China, via Laos and Myanmar and then transported across the borders to *Mae Sai* (ASTV Manager Online, 2010). Moreover, the recent construction of modern transport infrastructure also made it possible for *Tachilek* and *Mae Sai* to serve as the intersection of the borders of Southern China, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos PDR; connecting with other towns, cities and counties (Allen, Massey & Cochrane, 1998). These border towns were connected globally, and the business world in these border towns was never closed.

*Mae Sai* also became a place of dilemma. The reality had revealed itself as time had gone by. Because they sold pirated CD/DVDs, cigarettes and *Viagra*, they were targeted by the *Mae Sai* Municipal police, the *Mae Sai* Custom officers, the *Chiang Rai* Provincial police, Custom officers from *Bangkok* and the police from elsewhere. The authorities usually came to the market on Saturdays, Sundays, Tuesdays and/or Thursdays. They had to run away when they saw the authorities coming to inspect *Mae Sai Market*, otherwise the authorities squeezed money out of them. If they did not pay money, they took their CD/DVDs and ID Cards. These officers knew that it was difficult to re-issue a Myanmar ID Card.

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song CD/DVDs. The majority of CD/DVDs sold at *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek* was from the first and second sources.

Eventually, they were mostly arrested by the undercover *Mae Sai* police for selling illicit/ illegal CD/ DVDs, or by custom officers for selling smuggled cigarettes and *Viagra*. Because they were from Myanmar, they could not seek bail on Thai soil. They were put in jail in *Chiang Rai* for thirty-six days in such case. Some of them were arrested and put in jail more than once; arrested for the first time by the Mae Sai police, and again by the Bangkok copyright police. In the latter case they were charged with violating copyright laws and of having no copyright license. Subsequently, they were imprisoned for sixty days. In a worst case scenario, a *Burmese Muslim* was charged with smuggling CD/ DVDs and cigarettes, violating copyright laws and also illegal immigration. He was put behind bars for one hundred-seventeen days. All the sellers had suffered negative experiences. Every day was seemingly the same day, and time seemed to pass slowly. They were forced to share their accommodation and experience getting caught. They perceived fixity which was dramatically different from mobility and normally linked to cross-border movement. As a matter of fact, they felt totally locked up in a bounded space. It was also very crowded especially when sleeping at night time. Some of them who travelled afar from Myanmar's hinterlands missed their hometowns; a place they left a long time ago, a place where they used to be, and which used to be their home. After serving time in Chiang Rai Penitentiary, they were transported by the police van to the Mae Sai Boundary Post, where they were released and allowed to walk across the border to *Tachilek*.

Now that they learned a lesson from the job in *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek*, they solved immediate problems by developing border tactics in order to negotiate with the state border. They were not necessarily to remain spatially-incarcerated in the absence of spatial maneuvering skills. Their border tactics were rich and multiple; they acted through cross-border mobility and spatial-social networks, targeting the states' border loopholes. Their border tactics, to a certain extent, came to challenge and resist the states' border regulations.

For example, they had learned to negotiate with the CD/ DVDs shop owner in *Tachilek*, asking the owners to deal directly with the authorities in *Mae Sai*. In fact, businessmen who owned shops in *Tachilek* were willingly to pay to thank the authorities for helping smooth cross-border trade. But, *Tachilek's* shop owners could not help them every time. Otherwise, they had to pay the local officers about 1,000 to 1,500 *baht* (31-46 USD), or give them a few free porn movie CDs, and then they might ask the officers to be their spies.

The local officers could help them negotiate with officers whom these CD sellers did not know, and who came from elsewhere. There were also undercover police from *Chiang Rai* and/or *Bangkok*. So, they took one day off or hid CD/DVDs, cigarettes or *Viagra* elsewhere if those authorities came to the market.

Once there was a policeman from another place. He said that he would make an arrest, but he eventually asked for money. The seller then ran away to the inner space of *Doi Wao Market*. In fact, he was playing a trick on the officer. The officer followed. But, having run away from the police as routine, the seller had become familiar with every corner of the marketplace, so that a shortcut for him became a deadlock for the officer, who was not familiar with the market. By the time the officer reached the inner-most space of the market, he called his friends. The noise level rose and the locals saw a free-for-all. Nowadays, the police rarely go to arrest sellers at the market; they visited once a month. The CD sellers now say, “*Thai officers were now more generous and sympathetic than they were before.*” In fact, the big shops gave money to the authorities in order to thank them for help smoothing the cross-border commodity flows. Furthermore, A Chiang Rai Chief Judge once said, “*Chiang Rai Penitentiary was too crowded with mostly prisoners charged with amphetamine dealing case.*” This could imply that there was no space for minor offenders such as ethnic petty traders. Therefore, the *Mae Sai* space was always unexpected because it was relational to various situations and settings.

Selling CD/DVDs for several years had become their walk of life at *DoiWao Market*. The locals in the market community, who were *Tai Lue*, *Tai Yai (Shan)* and *Thai Chinese* all knew them. They were familiar with their stereotype. They were Myanmar’s cross-border ethnic petty traders, who were fugitives and sometimes imprisoned. But, they kept showing up. For one thing, their stereotype had wider implications than the local people could conceive. That is, they were now becoming accidental neighbors who were brought into contact with the locals through street disruptions like running away from the police, blocking the way and selling CD/DVDs, cigarettes and *Viagra*. Through cross-border petty trade, they and their neighbors met up without merging, but this small group of ethnic people came into recognition every day.

### **Cross-border Community Affiliation and the Material Roles in Shaping, Dividing and Uniting the Border**

At the beginning, the *Shan*, *Burmese*, and *Burmese Muslims* CD sellers were generally tied to *Mae Sai* as part of a spatial-economic dependence. *Mae Sai* was an

everyday co-working space for them where they earned an income to support their families. They sometimes loved the place when their sales were good, but some other times became bored due to the authorities' extraction and the locals aware of them. Although they felt ok with the job they did, they hardly went back to those street vendors whom they condemned as cheats. So, *Mae Sai* now shaped their lives and the values that they acquired through their trading practice of everyday life.

There were also some of Myanmar's *Burmese Muslims* that were more tied to *Mae Sai* as a spatial-spiritual border than their friends were. *Mae Sai* was a safe haven. That is, the *Muslims* who once lived in *Tachilek*, Myanmar's eastern part, could not help thinking about the killing of the *Muslims* in *Rakhine State*, Myanmar's western part. The ethnic clash between *Buddhists* and *Muslims* caused a large number of deaths. The *Muslims'* feelings were mixed regarding the *Burmese* immigration officers' discrimination against them in *Tachilek*. A *Muslim* said:

In Myanmar there was a story of ethnic fights between the Burmese Buddhists and Muslims. When I did a border pass with a Burmese officer, we looked at each other's faces and we recognized the differences between the ethnic Burmese face, and ethnic Muslim face. He did not say anything, but I could read from his face and eyes. He thought this country was Burmese's, not Muslims'. Such thing did not happen in Thailand. It happened in Tachilek. The Thais looked at us, and Islamic faces were just Islamic faces.

Once a Thai *Buddhist* monk asked a *Muslim* the reason for crossing the border from *Shan State* to *Mai Sai*, he remarked "they were still seen ethnic minorities and they felt discriminated and oppressed by the Burmese." Another *Muslimman's* memory cut back to a previous incident when his father told of an ethno-religious conflict that took place between *Buddhists* and *Muslims* in *Tachilek* in 1982. He said, "the cause was probably rooted in Myanmar's citizenship law. It refused to recognize the Muslims on ground of nationality." The incident lasted three days, but it was not big news in *Tachilek*. But, there was no such feelings and such story in *Mae Sai*. As such, cross-border mobility never limited itself to flows of people and goods, but included discursive feelings across the East and West, and between history and the moment.

Moreover, the *Muslim* CD sellers lived among their *Buddhist* neighbors in *Tachilek*, but they were newcomers who lived within a comparatively established *Buddhist* community. Crossing the border from *Tachilek* to *Mae Sai* seemed to be a social rite of passage; it marked the *Muslims'* transition from anxiety in *Tachilek* to spatial-spiritual relief in *Mae Sai*. A *Muslim* said “*Tachilek was very busy; there were many diverse peoples, religions.*” Another one helped confirm “*Mae Sai was comparatively pleasant to live because there was no messy thing [sic], and I never saw anything messy in Mae Sai. I had been here for nine years.*” Apart from selling items, they loved going to the mosque in *Mae Sai*. Some of them had rented a common room in *Mae Sai* for *Ṣalāt*. The *Muslim* CD sellers sometimes preferred *Mae Sai* to *Tachilek* because they had a place for a peaceful mind. They felt comparatively and emotionally-secured while being in *Mae Sai*.

Phenomenologically speaking, *Mae Sai* became inscribed as a meaningful place. However, it sometimes created a contradictory sense of place for these CD sellers who lived there. It was a real place for having an insecure and unsafe job as much as it was a space for upholding spiritual security, towards which they directed their intentions, both *Muslims* and others. The borders were becoming a crucial part of their lives in transition. *Mae Sai* also generated an experiential aspect for these CD sellers in the sense that it was interacted through a contradiction of ethno-political problems or economic hardship and socio-economic desire. That is, the living place ‘there’ became somehow alienated, while the migrant place ‘here’ became familiar through their state of mind. It was a place in-between imagination and actuality crashing with both hope and uncertainty. The space of *Mae Sai* was also re-made every day either materially or in terms of feelings and meanings.

Secondly, moving backwards and forwards across the borders of *Mae Sai* and *Tachilek* brought about spatial interfaces between the two border spaces at large on the one hand, and created both inter-border space integration and inter-border space division ‘from below’ on the other. That is, movement along the border space became a means of border negotiation that they adopted and diversified in order to re-function in practical ways.

To interpret, *Mae Sai* provided a demand in terms of the tourists. Among popular items easily available in *Mae SaiMarket* were CD/DVDs. Tourists including the locals helped create a demand for CD/DVDs. In the common sense of economics, the demand side in *Mae Sai* was matched by the supply side in *Tachilek*, with logistics delivered by the CD sellers.

Furthermore, *Tachilek* was a bonded warehouse in which illegal/illicit commodities

such as CD/DVDs, cigarettes, and *Viagra* were produced or stored in a secure place along the border. Rather, the production relied on the manipulation of the state's regulatory border loopholes and with the cooperation of influential persons without paying taxes to the central government in the area. The *Mae Sai-Tachilek* border spaces became a ground for the turnkey operation of CD/DVDs business and some other illicit/illegal commodities. Most importantly, it was the cross-border ethnic petty traders who linked and operated in-between the two borders. Consequently, the *Mae Sai-Tachilek* borders were re-configured into a 'free market economy' in their own right. Their everyday cross-border movement played a part in liberalizing the borderlands while resisting the state's capture.

Thirdly, as Myanmar's ethnic petty traders had long practiced cross-border movement, it allowed them to conceive the paradoxical nature of the borders via perceptual experiences. They came to know the nature of the border space through their everyday material and spatial practices. To put it another way, the borders had set in motion different and diverse trajectories as a result of state's power and control, and also the borderers' contests. On the one hand, the state claimed sovereignty over its geo-body, in fact its border had never been totally under its sovereign power; on the other, the CD sellers had found their ways to mobilize spatial resources via spatial-social network within and beyond *Mae Sai* border. As a result of these spatial dialectics, the border space was re-made and community re-defined.

*Mae Sai* implied a geographical significance. The border became a centering-margin from which borderers from both sides engaged in spatial-economic activities via commodities, whether it be between Myanmar's ethnic CDs sellers and the Thai authorities or between the CD sellers and intermediaries. These actors also helped re-define the *Mae Sai* border space in relation to *Tachilek*. However, they became a network that emerged in response to partial failure of the state's control. In other words, they were spanning across the border space by means of utilizing state's infrastructures and spatial chances created by the state's regionalism and the *Mae Sai-Tachilek* economic borders (Walker, 1999; Kook, 2007; Arnold, 2010). Therefore, the *Mae Sai-Tachilek* border spaces existed in a spatial symbiotic form on the one hand; on the other, its border space manifested a hybridizing spatial juxtaposition.



The border made it possible for borderers to convert the space into a kind of 'spatial capital'; in order to cultivate the benefits arising from the very nature of the state's physical border location, based on its border loopholes, including border situations and settings such as tourism. The locational border space was manipulated to be used as a production factor to maximize cross-border trade flows in order to facilitate the cheapness of the illegal/illicit components of cross-border commodities. This was because the state had contradiction in, and limitation on, the border which the state itself wanted to both facilitate and at the same time regulate the cross-border flows for the sake of its own economy. But, the state could not fully control the border. Thus, the spatial capital was grounded in, and practiced by, the way the CD sellers could convert the state's spatial contraction and limitation into their strength and opportunities, and enhance the outreach of their socio-economic border activity, through their everyday cross-border mobility tactics. The CD sellers could be able to de-regulate or work free of state's regulations in order to facilitate cross-border resources in support of their trading activity and the benefits it produced in their own right.

Everyday cross border trading practices were adopted as an effective means of border negotiation. They lived on, and as much as lived through, space by means of cross-border mobility through which they helped facilitate cross border flows both material and non-material. The material flows dealt with socio-economic life, helping to transport commodities across the border. The non-material flows generated a symbolic meaning which manifested itself as resistance to the authorities and a challenge to the state, embedded in everyday movements across the border. That is, their mobility could be a border tactic used to challenge the authorities' capture. This implied that the authorities could not control and confine them within a space. Conversely, the authorities were controlled and confined instead.

To illustrate, the Mae Sai Border Boundary Post served as gatekeeper and time-keeper whose main function was both to facilitate and regulate the flows-in and-out of Myanmar's cross-border people. The authorities opened and closed the border gate as a means of controlling both mobility and immobility. It was also this border gate through which the CD sellers traversed every day.

Nonetheless, when these CD sellers crossed the border gate to return home in *Tachilek*, they themselves set in motion a blocking of mobility for the authorities. That is, on

the one hand, the Thai authorities did not want to cross the border to catch them, or strictly speaking, could not catch them on Burmese soil. After 06:00 pm until 06:00 am, the border gate was closed. Subsequently, everything, whether it was from Myanmar or Thailand, must be back in its place. While the border gate was closed, mobility and movement were in abeyance, bringing about cross-border immobility for the authorities. This was because the authorities were infused with the abstract idea of a borderline imposed by the state, thus effecting their mentalities and perceptions. In other words, they themselves were also controlled and regulated by the state borderline; it's symbolic meaning generated a real effect. In contrast, the CD sellers who had lived along the borders and long engaged in cross-border practices ignored it; the borderline was by-passed everyday by them in support of their socio-economic practices.

Symbolically, the Mae Sai Boundary Post became a threshold which helped both link and de-link people, diving state political realms yet integrating socio-economic border space via cross-border flows of people and goods. To put it simply, the threshold was a border gate-like both separating and uniting borderers across Thailand's-Myanmar's border space. As a matter of fact, the borderers could be seen as living through the two borders, everyday bouncing back and forth between the borders.

Lastly, at the end of the day, *Tachilek* was also a local living space which accommodated a community of families, associates and relatives, all of whom were linked through common symbolic and cultural memories and feelings of an ethnic home (Tangseefa, 2003). The cultural connections and identities were embedded in spatiality. That is, these ethnic people had been able to maintain their cultures and identities by consuming their own cultures, both material and non-material, and by associating within their own ethnic groups. A Thai shop-owner observed, "*I did not know where these Burmese came from, I could not dare to talk even a word to them or quarrel with them. They remained within their own groups,*" The end of the Mae Sai Boundary Post also demarcated these CD sellers' home destination. A *Muslim* CD seller said:

I myself wanted to live in Mae Sai, but my wife did not want to. After I was released from the prison, I rented a house<sup>6</sup> here. My wife said if I was arrested by the police,

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<sup>6</sup> A Burmese passport holder can live in *Mae Sai* for three months and then have border pass renewed.

the whole family would be in difficulty. Staying here [Tachilek] was not that difficult. Morning, I crossed the border to sell items and evening just went back home.

Another Thai NGO employee remarked this ethnic petty traders group:

... staying there [Tachilek] could make them feel like home, and they also felt comfortable. But, if they were asked why they came to here [Mae Sai], they would say that baht was more valued than Kyat. ...a secured place was a place where they did not run away from the police, and pay money for this and that for them.

The journey of mind could take them to any imagination. In reality, they were eventually at home, and part of the thing they chose to live was the richer set of ethno-social attachment they had found here. *Tachilek* served as a place to accommodate their thinking in the context of being at home, and this eventually helped unite ethnic coherence through their real home space, but *Mae Sai* was a daily work space, and sometimes their escape from anxiety and messiness. This is also referred to 'Being and Time' because being was time; that is, *Tachilek* was being the place of time where the way they spent their life belonged to the members of their own ethnic community. In a nutshell, it was the place and time that was shared way of being (Heidegger, 1975).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The sociological imagination<sup>7</sup> plays a part in their lives; their individual life choices and personal troubles were partially affected and shaped by the larger border contexts. The *Mae Sai-Thachilek* border space had been the product of both Thailand's and Myanmar's policy practices. Nonetheless, such border policy practices produced different consequences to different people. CD sellers who were 'borderers' had also been shaped by the state policy practices to be 'wanderers', whose nature of livelihoods were moving from one place to another, or from border to border in search of jobs. They often said "*we had no future in this job, but simply lived from hand to mouth.*" Nonetheless, *Shan State* shares a border with Thailand, and the *Tachilek-Mae Sai* borders became homes for an increasing number of Myanmar's borderers, who were becoming wanderers. Their ethnic migrant border lives were possibly 'by default'. Although they had made conscious life choices which would make their

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<sup>7</sup> The sociological imagination is an outlook of society coined by the American sociologist Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962) to describe the ability to think oneself away from the familiar routines of everyday life and look at them from a different new perspective.

livelihood differences between their old rural homes and the new borderland, their decisions to make lives were subject to the state's practices in a wider spatial contextual relations.

The *Mae Sai-Tachilek* border space became a trans-national home for Myanmar's ethnic migrants, and this trans-national home emerged between, and overlapped with, their old rural homes and the new borderland, both being material and sensational. This was partially in line with *AmpornJiratikorn's* and *Appadurai's* arguments that mobility and networks nowadays gave rise to new forms of space, which were specifically called 'migrant public sphere' in *Chiang Mai* and 'diasporic public sphere' in *New York*. The creation of these so-called public spheres happened mostly in big cities, caused by large-scale migration. These public spheres revolved around radio waves, temples, festivals and movies, thus reinforcing their sense of community abroad. This specific case study partially furthers their studies in a sense that this cross-border community in-between the Thailand-Myanmar border revolved around cross-border daily life and was comparatively smaller and more transient.

In retrospect, *Massey's* 'production of space' was theoretically made through spatial-social relations, heterogeneity and uncertainty. Space was always in the process of being made and re-made. All in all, space functioned as a 'verb', not a 'noun', because of the uncertain process of possibility in its making and changing; it had to negotiate and articulate with unavoidable forces and events. *Massey* ascribed her idea of space to diversity, chaos and the complexity of modern day society.

Therefore, the *Mae Sai-Tachilek* borders could represent such space. The construct of cross-border community was all about catching up through, and interacting with, the flows of opportunities. Myanmar's ethnic cross-border petty traders moved in-between different borders in order to make their own community space (*Scott, 2009*). As such, their community was never concerned with borderlines, nor was it concerned with absolute state space out there, but instead dynamical and changeable spatial and social construction, which was the direct product of their negotiation and articulation with unavoidable challenges in order to create differences at the border space (*Massey, 2007; Gielis 2009*).

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