

## **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL OF MYANMAR MIGRANT LABOURERS WITHIN THAI SOCIETY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This research aimed to examine the social space of Myanmar migrant labourers within Thai society. The study applied a qualitative approach in studying Myanmar migrants working in Samut Sakhon Province, Thailand. The key informants were migrant labourers specifically selected from the populated area of Maueng District. The data was collected by in-depth interviews, participatory and non-participatory observations during 2014. Content analysis was employed to draw findings from the data. The findings revealed that migrant workers used the physical space of Thai Buddhist temples located in their residential community to reproduce their cultural and traditional activities on their non-working day which was Sunday. This was generally concerned with Buddhist religious beliefs, worship, and the paying of respect to spirits which created personal contentment. They had time on holidays and after work to socialize and interact with others at shops in the nearby market place, especially Gwyn and tea shops. This inherited tradition and culture was reproduced in the new location resulting in the reproduction of values within new social spaces in Thailand. The obvious way of maintaining Myanmar culture in these new social spaces included the wearing of traditional clothes, speaking their own mother language, chewing Gwyn and drinking tea, and using goods imported from their home country.*

**KEYWORDS:** Social space, Myanmar migrant labourers, Thai society

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The mass movement of people across political borders has taken place in conjunction with the development of human civilization, causing the world to become more of borderless community. While globalization causes the unfettered movement of capital, goods, thought and attitudes, culture and cross-border labour (Appadurai, 2001), especially cross-international labour in Thailand. It is a phenomenon which has been happening rapidly over the past five years from 2009-2014. During this period the Thai economy expanded and people have become more educated, creating a lack of low-level or unskilled workers such as those needed in construction, fishery activities, and daily-basic services. The fast flow of

cross-border migrant workers; namely from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, has seen the population swell to two million, with the vast majority of them being from Myanmar (some 1.33 million) who are working throughout Thailand. Metropolitan Bangkok and the urban towns surrounding it employ about 335,860 Myanmar workers, while 118,704 of them work in the central provinces, 101,219 in the Northern provinces, and 89,202 in the Southern provinces (Office of Migrant Labour Administration, 2014). The private sector which employs these labourers includes the fishing industry and seafood processing factories, which want migrant labour the most because these specific jobs are considered dirty, dangerous and difficult (Thailand Development Research Institute -TDRI, 2011).

Samut Sakhon is the centre of the Thai seafood and fishery industry, having 5,442 factories classified as involving the industry, and there are 166,438 Myanmar migrant workers working in these factories (Samut Sakhon Provincial Employment Office, 2014). Undoubtedly, these migrant workers have produced their own community in the province. Thai people, especially those living in the nearby areas harbour negative views towards Myanmar workers despite the fact that they are legally employed. Many of them were originally illegally smuggled into Thailand and employed causing this negative perception from Thai people and also the perceived effect on Thai national security due to their wrong doing in drug smuggling, or being the carriers of epidemic diseases; such as leprosy, elephantiasis and HIV (Krittaya Achavanitchakul, 2005). Not only do they display negative social behaviour, they also have no right access to government services such as healthcare, education for their children and are exploited in employment (Krittaya Achavanitchakul, 2000). Not only does this make them struggle to make a legitimate living but it also encourages them to become involved in uncontrolled black-market activity, such as illegal employment and sexual abuse. They also face the Thai government's immigrant control procedures which seek to order and organize international labour and employment, and which is, in itself, prone to bribery and corruption (Boonyarat Kanchanadit, 2007).

With hope that they would find a better life for themselves and their families in Thailand, Myanmar migrant labours in Samut Sakhon Province instead face different problems in terms of human dignity, right to receive access to services, negotiating power with government and employers, etc. Amidst their struggle to survive, the Myanmar migrant workers, both men and women, are trying to stand up for their dignity in their social space, projecting their own self and ethnic identity, their culture and traditions in order to maintain their original cultural values. Furthermore, what they show in their own cultural identity in individual social space creates relationships among Myanmar ethnic groups working in different places around the area. From the primary field observations in the target province, it is obvious that written Myanmar language can be found widely for public information in relation to government agencies, hospitals, business organizations and companies, boarding houses and banks. The migrant workers also organize different social activities, such as religious practices and traditions in temples located in the nearby area on different occasions and in playing the traditional sport known as 'Takraw.' They sometimes ask for social welfare, healthcare, and fair pay for employment like Thai workers. Their occasional social gatherings, mostly in a large groups of people, causes the production of social space, so demonstrating their power in contesting, bargaining, and capturing social space for themselves (Anan Kanchanapan, 2005). This happens in a social process involving the interaction and relationships between people. In other words, social processes refer to some of the general and recurrent forms that social

interaction may take. The interaction, or mutual activity, is the essence of social life. Interaction between individuals and groups occurs in the form of a social process. Social processes refer to forms of social interaction that occur again and again. Social interaction usually takes place in the forms of cooperation, competition, conflict, accommodation and assimilation. These forms of social interaction are called “social processes,” which refers to forms of social interaction that occur repeatedly in ways in which individuals and groups interact and establish social relationships. There are several forms of social interaction such as co-operation, conflict, competition and accommodation, etc. Accordingly, social processes are therefore the manner in which the relations of the members of a group, once brought together, acquire a distinctive character. Social space production happens when the social mechanism – or a set of elements, and their causal links that regularly lead from an initial social state to a subsequence one interact with one another (Jinsong, 2007)

This study of the social space produced by Myanmar migrant labourers in Thai society employs the social space concept of the triad formulated by Lefebvre (1991). The social space of people is produced and reproduced in three spaces, namely: “Physical, Mental and Social.” The physical space is the visible area, the mental space involves thoughts and values, and the social space itself implies the wide area that puts together the relationship of things occurring by interaction among social production, social reproduction, spatial code, building boundaries of place and spatial practices (Lefebvre, 1991). The concept of Lefebvre’s triad is applied as a framework in studying Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand in order to obtain an understanding of how they produce and reproduce their social space, which is believed to be limited, struggling, contesting space and value in the social processes of relationship adjustment, as well as social interaction system and culture reflecting interaction occurring in Thai society. It is interesting how the large number of Myanmar migrant workers living in an alien place maintains, produces, and reproduces their cultural values in another society under many constraints. The findings may then be helpful for administration and management of international labour within Thailand.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the process of producing cultural space made by Myanmar migrant labourers working within Thai society.
2. To examine the social mechanism used to produce cultural space by Myanmar migrant labourers working within Thai society.
3. To determine the affect of the producing of cultural space by Myanmar migrant labourers on Thai society.

## METHOD OF STUDY

This study of social space produced by Myanmar migrant workers employed the qualitative method to undertake an empirical investigation from observation and interview. Field notes and word data from phenomena were collected for the analysis. The researcher looked for themes and descriptions for significant information in themes and exclusive patterns from the set of participants. The target groups of the study were legitimate Myanmar migrant workers who were working and residing in the Thai community in Samut Sakhon Province of Thailand. The selected participants were those who had been in Thailand for five or more

years because they could communicate using the Thai language and were familiar to Thai community and people in the area. The key informants were leaders and individual workers who possessed a legal Myanmar work permit allowing them to work in different business enterprises in the province. They were selected specifically for balance and rich information concerning gender and type of work to give a correct representation of the population, which could provide significant information in solving cross-national labour problems in Thailand.

This qualitative research emphasized a case study of Myanmar migrant workers residing in large communities which had high potential to produce their social space outside their mother country. The unit of analysis included Myanmar individual workers and social groups. In-depth interviews, field participant observation, and non-participant observation were undertaken for data collection. The informants were selected within the criteria set –they had to be legally registered workers who had been working in the province for five or more years in Samut Songkhram province, and were able to communicate in the Thai language. The total key informants were 5 chair-persons from Myanmar labour organizations, 5 workers leaders and 20 workers from different groups working in different factories and business environments. All of the informants' identities were protected by using pseudonyms. The data was collected in two phases: pre-field observation and field observation in the target area.

1. In the first step before the real field observation, the researcher prepared primary information about the target area and identified the key informants. The paper work and informed consent was undertaken by correspondence with community leaders.

2. The second step of data collection, conducted in 2014, consisted of interviewing the key informants based on a constructed guideline non-participatory observation, and participatory observation.

The collected data from interviews and observations was then checked for its completeness. Then, the data was analysed by the researcher into categories, comparison and contrast was undertaken in individual categories, and the defining of the cause of the similarities or differences. Later, a comparison analysis between categories was made in order to identify the relationship in entire system based on a theory to explain the social phenomena and patterns. The research question was answered and described based on the analytical information or fact inductively drawn from the content analysis practice.

## FINDINGS

Based on the theory of social space production triad (Lefebvre, 1991), the Myanmar migrant labourers working in Samut Sakhon Province, Thailand, could be described as an ethnic group of people who possess a different culture from mainstream Thai culture. In this case 'Myanmar labourers,' maintained and produced their own culture of origin by producing their social space whenever there is a physical space that allows them to practice their mental space consisting of cultural values, beliefs, thoughts, traditions and rights. And when they practiced more mental space, they had more chance to produce their social space, especially when they gathered together as a large number of people, when they could empower themselves to address their conflicts and pave the way for a better living. Findings in specific details are as follows.

**Physical space produced by the Myanmar migrant workers:** In Samut Sakhon Province, there were a few big communities of the migrant workers. At the start a period there was a large influx of migrant workers from mainland Myanmar to Thailand in 2007, most of them worked illegally in various parts of the province. They used temples temporarily as a hiding place from Thai officials. In fact, there was a temple in the area that often gave shelter to those illegal migrant workers before they could find a safe refuge. This temple – known by the pseudonym of Wat Mongkoldham – is located about 10 kilometres away from the capital downtown of the province. It was considered a safe place for hiding because the temple is located by the Ta-chin River and its backyard grows thick shrub trees that are good and safe for hiding. The temple's monks also gave them food and water with sympathy which is one of the Buddhist practices in giving –believed to be a good deed of mankind. This caused more migrant workers to come repeatedly into the area because they passed the word to the others and they learned from the previous Myanmar labourers. Therefore, at the beginning of their migrant life, the Myanmar workers managed, luckily for them, to produce their social space at a charitable Buddhist temple, and learned how to stay in Thailand and work illegally. This nefarious behaviour was learnt from previous experienced Myanmar labourers from word of mouth. This social process occurs when people struggle to survive and this social phenomenon is obviously more solid in family ties, including people of a specific ethnic group who possess share the same nationality, origin and cultural roots.

The places identified as big communities of Myanmar migrant workers in Samutsongkhram Province were known (by a pseudonym) as “Chainiwate Community” having about 20,000 members, “Taladkao Community” having about 25,000 members, and “Taiyu Community” having about 25,000 members. These three communities therefore had their physical social spaces defined. The living conditions appeared to be crowded residential areas where they are cramped in small-sized rooms of 4-5 people, or even 10-12 in some places, with a rent of around 1,200–2,500 Thai Baht per month. They usually stayed together in ways that could be identified as mixed with workers of different races; Mon, Myanmar, Karen and Dawai staying together. Most of these migrant workers were employed in various factories, as fishing boat workers or fishing pier workers and at seafood processing factories. One of the informants (Sri) who lived in Talaskao Community said that:

*“Currently, this community looks pretty much like a small Myanmar town because most of the workers are ethnic Myanmar. This market place consists of three parts; a seafood sorting area where the workers do shrimp shell peeling and the sorting of fish for different owners. Some days there could be a lot seafood coming in, in which case the workers would get more money. And the other areas are buildings with rooms-for-rent and shops ranging from food shops, bookstores, clothes shop, video repair shop, barber, florist shop that the workers like to buy flowers for their Buddha worship, and most importantly a Beatle-nut shop and tea shop ...”* (Sri, Myanmar worker, 59 years of age, interviewed on August 1, 2014)

Similarly, Min said, *“This old market place is the place where we both work and stay. It is the biggest Myanmar community in Samut Sakhon Province. A lot of us live here, the big Myanmar community allows the shops around here have more customers because many female workers are working and staying here. On Sunday, which is a holiday, the salon gets more customers, especially on Buddhist festival such as Buddhist Lent when masses of customers will storm into the salons. I also do make-up for wedding ceremonies for Myanmar*



*couples. Some weeks, there are many weddings, so Min has to carry make-up gear in bags and go around exhaustingly for customers outside the salon, she has been doing now for ten years. Min added that many couples fall in love here and they get married. Many Myanmar children were born in Samut Sakhon. It was so lucky for me that I always have customers, but if there is no luck any more I might go back to Myanmar ...*” (Min, Myanmar worker, 45 years of age, interviewed on August 5, 2014).

Furthermore, from the observation of the workers in their community they kept their Myanmar cultural identity with them. In their rooms, they had a small altar-shelf holding an image of the Lord Buddha high on the room wall for the undertaking of worship. They would repeat this daily using fresh flowers each time. Some of them decorated the altar shelf with lamps to make it look beautiful. *“... It is a must for us. It is extremely necessary. We take care and worship the Lord Buddha every day. When we do the worship, we feel happy. We do this like we did at home in our country. We have the Lord Buddha’s image almost in every room ...”* (Yu, Myanmar worker, 40 years of age, interviewed on September 7, 2014).

In addition, the Myanmar workers liked to have a television and a stereo or CD player. Almost everyone had one. This was the fashion for men in the community, and they even showed off and competed with the sound of their stereos. They could buy music CDs easily in flea markets near their residence to entertain themselves, which was a way for them to find enjoyment in such a limited physical space at this time in Thailand.

In their daily routine, the migrant workers liked shop near their residence, especially in flea markets where there was a lot of cheap merchandise to buy. They actually liked to cook for themselves by buying fresh vegetables, pork, chicken, duck, and seafood from the nearby shops. They did not like to buy ready-to-eat food, but they needed dry food transported from the provinces near Myanmar border; namely Tak, Kanchanaburi, and Ranong. This dry food was available and distributed from the Talad Khao community and Chainiwet community. There were also many convenience shops around their residential area selling goods from their own country; such as Tanaka power, sacred or holy items and pictures and Myanmar music CDs.

*“... I was working as a fish sorter in a market place. When she is free, she will come to sell things here and saves her little money until she can buy a piece of land and build her house. She orders merchandize from Myanmar through the middle man in Sangkhla Buri District, Kanchanaburi Province every month. Best-selling goods are Tanaka powder used for skin and facial care. There are also other goods and snacks to, such as Myanmar fermented fish, magazines and Myanmar themed storybooks and novels. Many customers buy things from her stall only on Sunday, their day-off. They like flea markets very much because there is a lot of cheap merchandise, easy access and they are convenient. They buy what they like, and then go home to cook. Everything that they want is available – flowers, dry food, music CDs, everything ...”* (Um, Myanmar female worker, 35 years of age, interviewed on September 9, 2014).

*“... Whatever I want to eat, I can buy it here conveniently. Actually, I cook for myself, like I was at home. Whenever it is a holiday I invite my friends to have meals together. ...”* (Tong, Myanmar worker, 38 years of age, interviewed on October 11, 2014).

It can be seen that the large communities of Myanmar migrant labourers working in Samut Sakhon Province had their physical space for producing their society primarily in apartments, dormitories and rented rooms. The secondary places were the market places, and Thai Buddhist temples near their residential areas, where they could have an opportunity to socialize among Myanmar workers. The working place was not mentioned as their social space in which they could have social interaction but only the business exchange of labour for a wage.

**Mental space --value and cultural production:** Thai Buddhist temples near their residential areas were the places in which the Myanmar migrant workers undertook their social activities; such as making merit on the religious holidays at the beginning and end of Buddhist Lent, Myanmar National Celebration Days, creation health remedies for curing illnesses and fortune telling. Especially on the religious holidays, there were many workers participating in activities at the temples because it was convenient and easy for them to access. At the temples, they felt that they were not at risk of being caught by police officers. Gathering at the temples provided an opportunity for them to socialize and practice their own cultural and religious practices; this was the core value they kept. They worshiped the pagoda and built and restore other ones in the temple, such as the Golden Jubilee Pagoda, by raising money from within their communities. This cultural practice made that temple the symbol of their mental space which meant a lot for them, and they regularly came to make merit and worship the pagoda they built at that temple known as Wat Choke Mongkol (pseudonym). The temple was also the place for socialization and meeting other Myanmar migrant workers from other communities in the nearby provinces.

*“... It is essential for us to make merit at the temple and worship or build the pagoda as this is the mighty good deed. Especially, making merit on the beginning and end days of Buddhist Lent. There will be a lot of people crowding in the temple. We did like this in our home country, and we need to do it here, too. Religion is in our heart ...”* (Chai, Myanmar worker, 39 years of age, interviewed on November 14, 2014).

*“... Whenever we walk pass the pagoda, we make a Wai (pay respect) to it. We did this at home in Myanmar. We went to the temple to make merit. Here, we come to the temple when we have a day off on Sunday. ...”* (Winai, Myanmar worker, 39 years of age, interviewed on November 15, 2014).

It is obvious that the Myanmar workers in the province produced mental space in the community based on their belief in Buddhist religion, of value similar to that of Thais, but spiritually a little stronger. The temple is the only place that allows them to undertake spiritual and meaningful activities including socialization although it is such a confined area for them. Still, their religious spirit is high and the practice of worshipping and making merit makes them virtuously happy.

**Social space –social production:** Social space is actually produced in the visible physical space in which the people are living and gives their mental space meaningful value. In this study, it was found that not only did the Myanmar migrant labourers use the temple located in their residential area for undertaking traditional activities, but also other places around the

area such as Betel-nut shops were also meeting places for most Myanmar workers who came to buy Betel-nut ingredients for chewing called “Gwyn” in the Burmese language –a traditional and fashionable habit of chewing that can be addictive. Chewing Gwyn is considered the Myanmar workers traditional way of cultural inclusion. It is considered a “must do” practice for them. Buying a mouthful set of Gwyn is like ordering a bowl of noodle soup in that the buyer will wait for the seller to prepare the order to the customer’s liking. When coming to shops, they talked to each other and exchanged details of their working lives and socialized while waiting to be served. Leisure time gathering at either the temple or shops is the starting point of social group formation, particularly gathering at the temple to pay respect to their Buddhist religious spirits and hold traditional activities. Thai society considers Myanmar religious practices to be good deeds, similar to Thais’ traditions and beliefs, therefore Thai people and government officials or security guards thought this was not a problem for Thai society.

Moreover, grocery shops, especially those owned by Myanmar persons, were a popular place for the workers to shop for items and goods they wanted. The Gwyn shop and tea shop became the second central place for their socialization and information exchange. Therefore, the Gwyn shop businesses grew up and expanded around different working sites because the workers liked to consume what they were used to in their home country, causing shop-owners to import these goods from Myanmar via Thai provinces along the western border line, such as Tak and Kanchanaburi.

*“...Myanmar cultural identity can be seen everywhere here even though these workers have been working in this country in Samut Sakhon for many years. They still live their same old cultural daily life. For example, after work men wear Sarong and women wear long Sin skirt. Their Sarongs and Sin skirts are unique in style and of different colours from based on their ethnic background; such as a red Sarong belongs to the Mon ethic group while a blue Sarong belongs to the majority Myanmar people. Generally, chewing Gwyn is popular among all workers, therefore Gwyn shops can be seen everywhere in our community here. However, some shops are more popular than the others depending on how well the shop owner can make tasty Gwyn to meet the customers’ requirements; such as the ingredients, and mixture, and achieving a taste that is not too spicy. A good Gwyn shop will be crowded with customers, especially in the evening and on Sundays. They come from different places around here. Men like to wear a Sarong or sport shorts for playing sports, Takraw and football, while women bring their little children to buy food and other daily goods imported from Myanmar. Although Samut Sakhon is many hundreds of kilometres, away from our country, here in this old market we feel relief from being home-sick and a bit happy because we can talk to friends and others in our own Myanmar language, wear the same traditional style of clothes, and put Tanaka powder on our faces without feeling embarrassed. Also, labels and signs around here are written in Myanmar language; in factories, state agencies, banks, department stores and shops in markets ...”* (Tat, a Myanmar worker, 39 years of age, interviewed on December 19, 2014)

## DISCUSSION

The study of social spaces produced by the Myanmar migrant labourers working in Samut Sakhon Province, Thailand, showed that the migrant workers were working in 31



communities located in different districts, including 6 communities in Banpaew District, 4 communities in Kratoomban District, and 21 communities in Maueng District

The Myanmar migrant labour communities formed in the province showed a reproduction of alien culture that was related to economic, social and systematic living patterns occurred in the new place in which they were living, resulting in the formation of a new system of dependent relationships and ties among the migrant workers (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). At the same time, the migrant workers had maintained their own cultural identity in a new place outside of their original country; keeping the same way of life in a new social space in which they could reproduce their tradition and cultural practices through social activities and social gatherings in the physical space at Buddhist temples, shops and market places. Displaying their traditional practices reflected the reproduction of mental space to social and cultural space. This also shows that the Myanmar migrant workers' reproduction of social space resulted in an increase in strength in negotiations or protection of the labour's human rights. This study has found the same social space reproduction as a study of Laotian migrant labourers (Choopak Suttisa, 2013), and a study conducted by Rattana Tosakul (2009) showing that Laotian migrants living in the United of America reproduced their own cultural social space by doing traditional activities, especially gatherings for religious practice, maintaining their own cultural identity and values in new physical spaces along with adjustments so as to fit in to the novel culture of the new country. Similarly, Scheller and Faist (2010) revealed in their study that the migration of people to live in other countries caused the formation of social reproduction by maintaining their original traditions and identity from social gatherings both at the work place and other physical spaces. The study by Kang (2010), found that Lue migrants in the United of America reproduced their cultural identity and social uniqueness in new spaces through cooking food, clothes and dressing style, along with traditional and religious practices.

This study supports Lefebvre's theory of social space reflecting the production of social space formed by social interactions for social reproduction in a new physical space, beginning with the creation of place --temples and market places in this case, and then creation of a spatial code such as religious, spiritual and other valuable places. This social space reproduction was created through the economic and social structure, using time and place in everyday living and interactions made by those who use the place (Lefebvre, 1991). Thus, social space production and reproduction is like the fighting, bargaining and competition of groups of people in an adjustment process for a new role and relations within a new society (Anan Kanchanapan, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

This article details a study of social space produced by Myanmar migrant labour working in Thai society, Samut Sakhon Province, a pilot-programme of problem solving for international labour management undertaken by Thai state agencies under the Ministry of Interior. From 31 communities of Myanmar migrant labourers in Samut Sakhon Province, the most populated 21 communities of them are located in Maueng District. They work in factories and business related to the fishing industry and seafood processing. They stay in crowded dormitories and small rented rooms in poor living conditions and inadequate health care. However, they manage to keep their own cultural identity by practicing some significant

traditions which are mostly related to their strong religious beliefs. Large gatherings at Buddhist temples located in the area showed their evident social space reproduction in the new place outside of their own country. Three essential things in their life that they must do are: firstly paying respect to the Lord Buddha at home and temple, secondly saluting the golden pagoda and thirdly chewing Gwyn (mouthful Betel-nut set). The Buddhist temple is considered the most significant place for Myanmar migrant workers to reproduce their mental and social space, which obviously allows them to display their cultural maintenance through different activities, namely: the wearing of ethnic costumes, consuming goods imported from their country and using their own language. Within limited and restricted space, they still want to be themselves as they were and this allows space for them to be happy.

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