

Future-making and frictional mobility in the return of Burmese migrants

Rangkla, Prasert

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Rangkla, P. (2019). Future-making and frictional mobility in the return of Burmese migrants. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 12(1), 17-30. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0011>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>

Future-Making and Frictional Mobility in the Return of Burmese Migrants

Prasert Rangkla

► Rangkla, P. (2019). Future-making and frictional mobility in the return of Burmese migrants. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 12(1), 17-30.

This article explores the experiences of recent returnees from Thailand to Southeast Myanmar and the complicated landscape of their future-making. In looking at the arduous journeys of Burmese migrants both in Myanmar and Thailand, I discuss how economic and political developments in reform-era Myanmar have informed Burmese migrants' idea of return migration. Seeking a better life through coming home, they have encountered factors of friction and traction that either support or impede their plans. Accordingly, I argue that the return of these Burmese workers has become frictional mobility rather than a straightforward return. Ethnic politics and land boom in the region have intensified social inequality and conflicts that eventually make the organization of return more complex. The situation allows migrants to settle in their home country, postpone the return, and continue shuttling at the border while using the pattern of movement as a livelihood.

Keywords: Burmese Migrants; Future-Making; Mobility; Myanmar; Return Migration

~

INTRODUCTION

The recent reforms in Myanmar (or Burma) since President Thein Sein's government (2011-2016) have significantly changed the country's conditions. The political democratization increasingly promotes optimistic views about the future, particularly in light of the general elections in 2010 and 2015 (Lall, 2016). The country has received an increase in technical and financial assistance from foreign governments and international agencies. Myanmar's economy is growing rapidly, with a GDP annual growth rate of 6-8% during the period between 2012 and 2016 (Asian Development Bank, 2017). The positive economic situation of this period appeals to foreign investment and general commerce. At the individual level, people are more willing to spend money on daily consumption and property acquisition. A larger variety of commodities and services are available to Burmese people at local markets. Regional and international trade and other economic transactions boost Myanmar's overall economic performance. Some Burmese who once experienced displacement from political suppression, civil war, and economic underdevelopment are making the decision to go back to Myanmar and become part of these seemingly promising changes.

Traveling back to one's country of origin is known as 'return migration' in academic literature. Much attention has been paid to the patterns and push-pull

factors of return migration (Gashi & Adnett, 2015; Hirvonen & Lilleør, 2015). Major pull factors that attract migrant workers to return include the improvement of socio-political conditions and the increased economic opportunities in the home country. At the same time, push factors of the receiving countries, such as high costs of living and xenophobia, also motivate migrant workers to return. Migrant workers keep watching the social and institutional situations in their countries of origin. According to Cassarino (2004), migrant workers often intend to stay abroad temporarily and have prepared their return migration plans, including migration duration and savings target. They also anticipate how their skills and financial resources could be put to good use in the country of origin.

A number of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand express their intention to return to their own country in the long run. Recent socio-economic developments in Myanmar, including foreign direct investment, deregulation, and public services improvement, persuade many Burmese to return. Better job opportunities and political stability are major pull factors for return migration. According to Mya Thet & Pholphirul (2016, p. 1012), investment opportunities have a greater influence on Burmese migrant workers' return than job availability or wages. Workers do not want to go back and just work in low-wage jobs. Even though economic, especially employment, prospects are improving, wage and working conditions at home are still significantly inferior. They rather prefer to run their own business upon return than look for jobs. With greater job opportunities in Thailand, many Burmese workers thus remain and continue to work there in order to accumulate enough savings to start their own business in Myanmar. They remain outside the country, watching and waiting for the right time to return.

However, studies that emphasize macro-level analysis pay little attention to the actual experience of return migration. This article argues for the necessity to take the experience of movement seriously, as also suggested by mobility studies (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). According to Cresswell (2010), mobility is not simply a 'free flow', but is channeled and sometimes stopped through friction or resisting forces. Instead of assuming a linear movement, this article asks how returnees to Southeast Myanmar experience, make sense of, and organize their return. How does the complex scenario of a long-stunted, now growing, yet still limited economy effect Burmese migrants' decisions and future-making?

This article forms part of a qualitative research project entitled "Future and Possibility of Life: A Study of Burmese Migrants and Temporality". Data collection includes literature review, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with approximately 30 key informants, both in Thailand and Myanmar. Fieldwork was conducted for three months in 2017 in Southeast Myanmar (Myawaddy, Hpa-an, and Mawlamyine) and for another three months in 2018 in Thailand (Prachuap Kirikhan province). My key informants were mainly identified and contacted through a snowball technique. Although their ethnic backgrounds are diverse – Karen, Burmese, Mon, and Pa-O – this article refers to them as Burmese in order to emphasize their shared experience of the national reform and transformation. I interviewed some key informants who are small business owners in Myanmar and some who remained in Thailand with enthusiasm for the return. Most of them once fled the protracted civil war and economic underdevelopment under the Burmese military governments

and have worked long-term in Thailand. Although real town and village names are retained here, I use pseudonyms for all interviewees' names to guarantee anonymity.

At the beginning, the article reviews the pull factors or the opportunities that encourage Burmese workers to return to their home country. The article continues with an ethnographic vignette illustrating how the return of a Burmese worker has been shaped by expectations of the future, which is referred to here as "future-making" (Kleist & Jansen, 2016). It then explains the factors of friction that have impeded and slowed down Burmese return mobility. The subsequent two sections explore Myanmar's land boom, which has become a boon for some returnees and a barrier for others, and the consequential upsurge of social inequality. Finally, the article argues that the complex landscape of Myanmar in transition both helps and impedes Burmese migrants' future-making through return, allowing them to either settle, or postpone the return, or even continue shuttling across the Thai-Myanmar border.

RETURN WITH ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS

Southeast Myanmar has experienced an economic boom after the policy reforms since 2011, evident in the growing import-export trade and development of new infrastructure. The cross-border trade between Thailand and Myanmar has increased substantially. The merchandise export values at the Mae Sot (Thailand)-Myawaddy (Myanmar) border crossing point have jumped from less than USD 1 billion in 2011 to USD 2.1 billion in 2015. A large number of people in Myanmar have benefitted from the country's open economic policy. Many research informants are doing business by relying on imported commodities from Thailand, for example, food supplies for restaurant owners; tools and equipment for hairdressers, mechanics, and technicians; clothes and sports equipment for shopkeepers. Another factor underlying this growth is infrastructure investment. In the study area, a new, better-quality road was constructed, which officially opened in September, 2015, linking the Burmese eastern borderland to other commercial cities.

Business opportunities in the newly-open economy are, however, limited. Crumbling infrastructure and military cronies' influence in politics and business impose constraints on commercial investment and commodity production (Chia, Aung, & Shawng, 2016). Consequently, recent Burmese returnees' businesses focus only on basic services and small-scale trade. Burmese returnees choose to make a living in three different categories of business. First, many provide shipping and transport services. While logistic services facilitate linking the cross-border trade between Thailand and Myanmar, passenger transport has become a public service to travelers, including those migrants moving out of the country to work in Thailand. Second, some returnees work in the construction sector and property agencies, such as construction materials shops and land brokerage. Finally, many earn their living in the service sectors. These include hair and beauty salons, tea and coffee shops, food and beverage shops, groceries, clothes-selling shops, chicken-raising farms, video recording services, remittance services, and betel nut vending.

Notably, these new business-operators can be seen as small-scale entrepreneurs. Their stories sound intriguing, especially their alertness with regard to and their navigation of Myanmar's political-economic changes. Many observed the political

transformations in Myanmar while they worked as paid laborers abroad. They then discovered profit opportunities hitherto unnoticed – the ability that Israel Kirzner (1997) defined as “entrepreneurship”. Their present lives and future possibilities are re-examined by their constant observations. Some try out pilot businesses in their home country, and, if these go well, eventually pursue this venture. Their re-engagement with Myanmar-in-transition shapes their new experiences. They learn about the economic gaps that they can fill to earn their livelihoods. For example, food-shop owners know what their customers want to eat at affordable prices, and clothing shop-owners know their customers’ taste in clothing fashions. Their entrepreneurial acuity keeps them monitoring trends and so re-conceptualizing their own opportunities back home.

To realize the economic opportunities in Myanmar, these individual returnees rely on three kinds of capital. The first and most important one is financial capital, or their savings. The money serves to materialize their business ideas. Some types of enterprises, such as chicken-raising farms, require a large sum of money, initially and for maintenance. Since it is virtually impossible to get a loan in Myanmar, savings are so crucial and become the main source to fulfill entrepreneurial plans. The second kind of capital is the technical expertise gained and practiced while working abroad. The knowledge of mechanics, technicians, hairdressers, and culinary workers can be transformed into career opportunities. The final type of capital is knowledge of business management. Some returnees were self-employed while they were living in Thailand. They understand the management of rental spaces, procurement, material storage, staff employment, and customer services. With these kinds of capital, returnees have the potential to pursue their post-displacement projects.

These returnees’ alertness to opportunity cannot be analyzed without taking into account existing socio-political conditions. Becoming an entrepreneur is not a pre-determined expectation of individuals, as conventionally discussed. Their recognition of, creation of, and initiative to seize opportunities are linked with multiple structuring factors (Gough, Langevang, & Namatovu, 2013, p. 298). The more relaxed political atmosphere in Myanmar, for example, has had a profound impact on returnees’ decisions, providing basic freedom and everyday security. Burmese people are able to travel around and to earn their living without fear of being persecuted. Town residents confirm that travelling at night has become safer compared to the past. Burmese returnees see major urban towns as places of commercial opportunity, because they represent transport hubs, having better basic infrastructure and large numbers of clients. Many Burmese emigrants, thus, do not return to their homes in rural areas of Karen State and Mon State. Going back to Myanmar therefore means earning their living in commercial towns. They invest different kinds of capital to pursue the economic opportunities there.

FUTURE-MAKING IN RETURN

To return to Myanmar and survive with a small-scale business has attained specific significance in Southeast Myanmar, where emigration has been common for decades. Narratives of economically-possible return create hope about a future life at home for many Burmese working abroad. Recent returnees have expressed their desire to

be able to make a living in Myanmar. They seek economic opportunities to enable them to sustain their return. Hope plays a major role in future-making. Hope poses a temporal landscape that becomes a palimpsest of the past, present, and future, with varying intensity. In hope, there is “a wish for a change that cannot be effectuated in the moment” (Dalsgård, 2014, p. 99). Kleist and Jansen (2016) suggest that anthropologists should investigate hope “as it occurs in concrete social settings and geo-political-moments” (p. 374).

Imagining the future has been an important element of Burmese returnees’ life, also for Jor Hoe and his wife who returned to Myanmar in late 2013. The couple was very optimistic about the possibility of living in transitioning Myanmar. In Thailand, they had worked in a factory producing stereo speakers for 13 years but left the workplace due to internal conflict. Jor Hoe did not return to his home village near Mawlamyine, but went to a border town in Karen State, named Myawaddy. He co-invested with a younger brother in opening a shop repairing exhaust pipes for cars and motorcycles. His brother worked in an automotive garage with an uncle for five years. As he planned to start his own business, he asked Jor Hoe to join in. The latter believed that his brother had experience in the business, so he chose to move there. They rented a building in a good location, close to a bus station and a road junction. A former garage owner sold them a set of mechanic equipment at a low price. Since the opening, Jor Hoe has tried hard to make the business profitable and to adapt to the economic forces that prevail in the country.

For a newcomer, running a business inevitably involves difficulties. The shop initially had only a small number of customers. The brothers turned to accepting different jobs involving metal and steel welding to expand their services with existing tools. However, they still had to cope with the high costs of financing the building lease. The rent costed them about USD 1,700 every six months, and the whole sum had to be paid in advance. In late 2014, they found that they could share the building for commodity storage, which alleviated some of their rent burden. Both of their wives also helped out by running a food and tea shop in the building. Jor Hoe himself found other ways to increase his income, such as providing motorcycle taxi services and finding customers to rent a car owned by another younger brother.

Jor Hoe’s striving under the conditions of transitioning Myanmar has been shaped by the ongoing infrastructure developments and economic growth in Southeast Myanmar. Myawaddy, the present location of Jor Hoe’s business, has been bustling with cross-border trade with Thailand. The increasing commerce required more transport and passenger vehicles that eventually increased the brothers’ potential customer base. The poor and limited infrastructure in the region is also gradually upgraded. The construction of a new road replaced a one-way road winding across steep mountains. It helped ease traffic congestion between Myawaddy and other Burmese cities, facilitating logistics and passenger transport. Another new Thailand-Myanmar border-crossing bridge is also under construction. As soon as the bridge is opened, border trade and other economic activities between the two countries are expected to flourish.

Running a business in Maywaddy appears to be a good decision, yet living in Myanmar’s transition period entails an inevitable uncertainty. Jor Hoe’s planned return to Myanmar is still far from achieving a financially secure life. After a year

and a half, he and his wife took different jobs for their economic survival. They have put a lot of effort into struggling with existing conditions. Their hope for a better life is based on their striving practices. Jor Hoe took any paid jobs related to metal and steel welding. He sometimes asked his skilled father to help him with certain kinds of work he could not do by himself. He anticipated that his small shop could be turned into a garage, seeing the town's booming economy. Jor Hoe's wife co-invested with her sister in selling second-hand appliances. Furthermore, she persuaded her husband that opening a cheap plastic utensil shop is a promising business, as none of this type exists in the region.

The story of a Burmese returnee, like Jor Hoe, demonstrates the effort to “modify or customize various aspects of our temporal experience and resist external sources of temporal constraints and structure” (Flaherty, 2011, p. 3). Their ideas about the future determine how they act in the present moment. However, the success of their efforts is not guaranteed. In the case of Jor Hoe, his 18-month experience in returning and running a small business was confronted with challenges and setbacks. The low number of customers hampered his hopes and realization of commercial success. His garage had insufficient income for the high rental costs. According to latest information, Jor Hoe's joint business collapsed, and he started earning money from a small vending stall in the same town. The following section investigates why future-making projects like his have had limited chance of success in contemporary Myanmar.

ENCOUNTERING FRICTION

Future-making, can be a naïve projection of a better life if it ignores what is actually happening on the ground. Returning to Myanmar-in-transition, Burmese migrants inevitably face challenges and uncertainty against the background of two distinct processes: Myanmar's new economic prosperity, which has been described earlier, and flawed peace-building endeavors. The latter comprises Myanmar's peace process during the period between 2012 and 2015, during which the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the Myanmar government and different armed ethnic groups was reached. The NCA mitigated armed fighting in Southeast Myanmar. The pacification provided personal safety and overall security. However, the peace agreement provides no guidance regarding the surrender of weapons and armed group dissolution. Subsequently, rare incidents of low-intensity fighting continue to have negative effects on daily routines and economic activities. A group of Burmese returnees in Myawaddy complained that their inter-town shuttle service was sometimes suspended during tense periods. When the conflict settled down, it took a few days before passenger transportation and shipping could return to its normal levels.

Large areas of Karen State in Myanmar have been under the dynamic influence of armed conflict between the Burmese army and the Karen insurgent group. Internal conflicts within the latter led to the formation of small Karen factions whose relationships with the Burmese government are discretely structured by different negotiations (for details on Karen's internal fragmentation, see Gravers & Ytzen, 2014). All Karen armed groups initially reached a ceasefire agreement and finally signed a peace agreement with the government in 2015. While all groups remained armed, the government gave them unofficial authority over particular territories in Karen State.

The quasi-autonomous zones have high potential for future economic investment. These are, for example, around Myawaddy, which is the border gate to Thailand, and around Hpa-an, Karen State's capital, where many new economic projects have recently been launched.

Personal economic interests have been integral to the flawed peace process. The Burmese government awards lucrative assets to Karen armed groups who signed the peace agreement, increasing their local influence. Their political power is thus closely bound to their economic power, especially in the selling of imported second-hand cars and property development. Their local influence includes owning specific plots of land near highways, controlling the assigned land and community living on that land, gaining access to business licenses, authorizing mining concessions, and smuggling merchandise. When different Karen groups and the Burmese army claim authority over the same resource sites, competition leads to shootings and other armed battles. Recently, most conflicts have been related to contested resource control between different groups, including Burmese authorities.

The decision whether to return to Myanmar is thus also based on an evaluation of political circumstances in the region. Different interest groups can take an active role in shared political authority. Some leaders of Karen armed groups can take control over any movements in their own areas. Returnees living in Myawaddy and other major economic centers in Southeast Myanmar inadvertently confront difficulties caused by such political dynamics.

This article argues that the Burmese return trajectory is under the influence of 'friction'. Friction, a physical force of resistance, is also a social and cultural phenomenon that is experienced as one is, for example, stopped while driving through a city, or encounters suspicion at check-ins at international airports (Cresswell, 2014). Friction may slow down movement, or impede it. Inaction, slowness, congestion, and blockage result when people, things, and ideas 'rub' against each other. Friction then implies particular kinds of uneven power arrangements in human movements.

The return of Burmese to Myanmar has unavoidably become a 'frictional mobility', as it rubs against other entities and their movements. In the post-military era, different groups have mobilized towards reaching different ends: State agencies and locally influential persons have accelerated several economic development projects. Leaders of armed groups have been influential players in certain businesses. At the very least, their actions disturb, slow down, or impede Burmese workers' movement and mobility.

TRACTION AND LAND BOOM

Friction, as explained above, does not only impede the possibility and potential of mobility but also enables particular forms of traction. The domination of armed group leaders in Karen State is far from completely obstructive to mobility. Traction appears through the booming trend in private land acquisition in the areas under study. A 'land rush' is especially evident in Myawaddy, where money-making is comparatively much easier than in other places in Southeast Myanmar. The town itself has been the transit point of human, commodity, and financial flows between Myanmar and Thailand. Burmese from elsewhere as well as Burmese migrants in Thailand move to

this town with the hope of being able to take advantage of economic opportunities.

The land transaction boom in Myawaddy and other nearby towns takes place at two different markets. The first market is land acquisition for investment and other commercial purposes. Another one appears among small-scale land buyers for general housing. Commanders of different Karen armed groups oversee land supplies for both markets. Some groups who have prevailed in the area since the 1990s occupy vast, scattered areas. Some locations were previously used as military posts; other plots are deforested areas claimed after the end of a timber concession. Recently, the size of Myawaddy town substantially expanded towards forest-cleared areas. Land plots along the Asian Highway No. 1 rank as first priority for business investors, and are usually overpriced. Karen commanders built new dirt roads linking occupied land to the main roads. Some sites even provide basic facilities, such as water, electricity, and a drainage system. It is then divided into small plots that are sold for house construction. The land market targets ordinary Burmese, especially those with savings from working abroad. A number of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand bought these plots of land with expectations for future use.

The land boom underlines the key role of ethnic armed groups at the Thailand-Myanmar border. During the past four decades, they have sought to control the cross-border movement of people and commodities. Their capacities have waxed and waned through different political periods (Smith, 1999; South, 2008). After the county opened up, they became informal agents selling land to Burmese emigrants. During the period between 2013 and 2015, the number of emigrants buying land around Myawaddy increased significantly. Plot sizes offered by developers vary, depending on and responding to purchasing capacities. The smallest land parcel is the most popular one, 40 feet by 60 feet. Its price ranges from USD 1,400 to USD 3,000, depending on location, facilities, and speculated profit potential. The preferred transaction is in Thai *baht*. The owner can build a small house in a given area, with some leftover vacant space. Certain estate sites turn into residential communities, with a number of home owners, grocery shops, and sometimes Buddhist monasteries. However, some developed sites are still unoccupied, equipped with no basic facilities except for a paved road. The developers have done no more than clear and fence the land with pillars and barbed wire.

When visiting a new neighborhood at the northern fringe of a town named Thit Ta Ping (which means single tree in English), one can notice more than 30 houses that have recently been constructed, while some others are still in the process of building. The origins of its residents are diverse. Most bought land in the community following the word-of-mouth of friends and relatives who had been there. Thit Ta Ping is a good example of a successful estate development in high demand. It is situated just 4 km north from the current center of Myawaddy and close to many infrastructure projects planned for construction, such as the second Thailand-Myanmar Friendship Bridge and a new wet market. Many Burmese emigrants with financial capital are interested in buying land there, as the location is forecast for urban expansion and business opportunities. Walking out of the community to the west, one will also find vacant plots of land. A Karen fellow explained that all of them belong to private owners. They bought them for future opportunities and their economic potential, although many of them still work elsewhere.

Thit Ta Ping is a land allocation project initiated by a vice-commander of Division 999 of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which has now been transformed into the Border Guard Force (BGF). Its initial phase started in 2008, aiming at the housing demands of ordinary Burmese. It drew more attention and activity when the open economic policy was launched and a ceasefire signed between the Karen insurgent group and the Myanmar government. These plots of land have since then become housing land for recent returnees. Some Burmese even operate their business there, such as grocery stores, noodle shops, and small-scale manufacturing. Notably, all of these transactions are carried out without legal documents related to private land tenure rights. The buyers only get certificates signed by local leaders who actually work under the BGF commander's supervision. These informal papers possess no legal validity in Myanmar. They are merely guarantee documents from the ethnic armed groups, and buyers have to put their trust in the sellers.

The close encounters between Burmese returning for projects related to livelihood and armed groups' influence have not prevented or stopped further human movement. The friction simply causes delays in some moving practices and enables mobility within other particular social contexts. Burmese emigrants have seen the opportunities of land access and possession and other affiliated benefits in economically booming towns. Many returnees materialize their dreams of returning home through different channels. They purchase land parcels, build houses, and earn a living there. These dwellers then tell their siblings and friends who still work in Bangkok to grasp the opportunity too. The latter usually make a short visit to check out the situation and buy the land offered to them. Some buyers may have no idea of what to do next. If someone else then makes them an offer to buy the land, they are willing to sell it for a lucrative profit. While some returnees invest in their future through land acquisition, what is the impact of the current land situation on the region and future opportunities of return migration?

UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF HOPE

The land rush illustrates how frictional mobility impedes the future-making of Burmese returnees. The setting of Myawaddy and neighboring areas brings about speculative land transactions and expensive land prices. The increasing demand for land pushes prices too high for easy acquisition. Some land parcels change hands very quickly, with the price increasing each time the parcel is resold. When a land owner earns a big profit from a land deal, the neighbors usually increase the value of their own land parcels too. The owners of vacant land nearby also put it up for sale. Every land owner takes advantage of the boom for greater profit margins.

This land speculation has profound social consequences for the Burmese community and the choices of those who plan to return in the near future. First, the business strengthens the influence of ethnic armed groups who have not disarmed following the 2015 nationwide peace agreement. The commanders of ethnic armed groups become the real beneficiaries of the land boom. The development of their estates brings them greater wealth. The earned money is spent on their own investments and certainly on increasing their armaments. This entails a re-invigoration of their political control. The social and political relations in Karen State are transforming

along considerably complicated patterns. The ethnic armies have become strong contestants to government power. It will be difficult to transform them into civilian entities. Future return to Myanmar is inevitably confronted with their mafia-like influence.

Another consequence is the emergence of new land dealers and their speculative schemes. Ordinary Burmese become land agents, selling land plots for big profit without producing anything valuable. The lucrative financial benefits lure them to participate in this activity. Some of them earn a lot of money and spin speculations further. The story of Ti Wa Shu, a Karen returnee living in Myawaddy, demonstrates this well. He came back to Myanmar without regular employment in early 2013. He bought a 6 ac plot of land around Thit Ta Ping for housing and small-scale farming, as a revered Buddhist monk had advised him to do. A year later, another land-seeker bought half of his land, by paying him five times the amount he had paid for the whole parcel. He sold another quarter of the land for a profit in 2015. He planned to do future speculation by forming a partnership with another three friends to buy a large land plot. They thought that if the future Burmese economy continued to grow, their investment would yield them great profit when selling the land later.

The situation in Myawaddy shows early returnees fulfilling their dreams of the future at the expense of more recent returnees. As noted by Ghassan Hage (2016), there is an unequal distribution of hope, as certain Burmese acquire more profit potential than others. Land speculation, as in the case of Ti Wa Shu, along with the economic growth, generates the problem of overpricing. For those who return and buy land and a house, future-making in Myanmar is much more promising and secure than for poor emigrants with less financial capability. The latter find it difficult to resettle in Myanmar. New allocated land plots are so expensive that they cannot afford them with their savings. The speculation business has explicitly mitigated the possibility of realizing their hopes in their return.

The pursuit of future possibilities creates not only economic but also political uncertainties and daily pressures that become constitutive of more complicated relations in Southeast Myanmar. The flawed peace arrangements and strengthened local armed groups increase risks for future returnees. When interest groups like these interrupt the general business climate through their local domination, ordinary Burmese wishing to do business there might have to reconsider their dream of enjoying the seemingly flourishing economy of Myanmar-in-transition. Intervention by these armed groups or small flare-ups of fighting can undermine their capacity for profit-making. Land allocation projects have facilitated the hopes of some, but the politics of hope now point to uncertainty and exploitation. Land speculation has contributed to the escalation of social inequality among the Burmese and negatively affected the probability of the future return of Burmese emigrants.

TOWARDS COMPLEX MOBILITY

The Burmese return phenomenon from Thailand brings about enthusiasm for a future life in Myanmar. In local communities, stories of returning become important narratives. People talk about successful and failed cases of returnees with great enthusiasm. They admire certain outstanding returnees who have demonstrated

economic endurance. As a matter of fact, only a small number of Burmese emigrants can attain such an achievement back in their homeland. For example, in Taunggalay, a Karen village near Hpa-an, a group of villagers praised a Burmese named Jor La Thu who was good at money-making. The man is an agent buying and selling second-hand cars imported from Japan through the border with Thailand. He has become a role model who knows well how to use entrepreneurial skills to earn money, despite little financial capital. His career path draws further conversation, as he co-invested with a friend and bought a second-hand tractor which he hires out for field plowing. Many landowners in the village use his services in order to clear weeds and bushes on their farmland.

Those who remain outside Myanmar closely observe what happens to their friends who have returned. For Burmese migrants in Thailand, going back to Myanmar eventually becomes a necessity when they get old. The stories of the future carried by recent returnees to Myanmar have significantly shaped the hopes of the Burmese working abroad. These Burmese migrants ought to be seen not only as migrant workers, but also as subjects who make their own dreams about what the future holds, based on the transformations taking place back in Myanmar. Burmese migrants in Thailand not only think of returning home; some even engage in the return experiment. Yet, there are a lot of uncertainties and unequal distribution of resources and hope in Myanmar.

The overall situation encourages Burmese migrants to embark on a return experiment before returning indefinitely. During my interview with Jor La Thu, Taunggalay's appraised businessman, he introduced me to one of his friends, Ma Cho. She is a married Mon woman, who was 50 years old. At that time, Ma Cho and her husband took a three-week leave to visit Ma Cho's family in Hpa-an. Her parents escaped fighting and moved from a rural Mon village to the town in the mid-1980s. In the early 1990s, Ma Cho and her husband moved to work as undocumented workers in Thailand, due to unemployment at home. The couple had four children. The two older sons worked with the parents in Thailand, while the other two ones were with their grandmother in Hpa-an. In Thailand, they have been employed in different kinds of work in the fishery industry. In the meantime, Ma Cho also has her own small business. She buys and dries cuttlefish's black ink-like deposit and sells it to animal feed production mills.

Ma Cho thinks about future return to Myanmar, but she does not know how to survive economically there. Two years ago, Ma Cho bought five wooden houses on scattered plots from neighbors in her family's community. She rents out dilapidated shanties there to rural migrants who move to work in the town. During the trip, when I met her in Hpa-an, she decided to buy another land plot suggested by Jor La Thu. It is near the newly established industrial zone. She explained her decision to me:

Land plots are going to be more expensive. If I don't get some today, it will be impossible to buy later. Land in my mother's community is not suitable for business. It is a residential slum and is flooded in the rainy season. . . . I don't know what to do with this new plot. I might run an ice-production site; there are quite a few ice sellers here.

The couple's wish to return has involved multiple moves in recent years. Ma Cho's husband remained in Hpa-an after that visit. He planned to investigate the possibility of the return for the whole family. Later, he came back to stay with Ma Cho in Thailand. He found it was difficult to find ways to earn an income there. The following year, Ma Cho herself went back to stay in Hpa-an for six months, and returned to Thailand with similar results. She found her hometown lacked opportunities to earn money, and her daily expenses were much higher than her income. She therefore postponed the timing of the return. Some of Ma Cho's friends in her Burmese community in Prachuap Kirikhan, who once experimented with returning, have recently also shown less enthusiasm.

Some returnees take their re-engagement with Myanmar as a continuous movement. A case in point is that of Tun Myint, an ethnic Pa-O man. Tun Myint returned from working in Bangkok in 2013 and started running a motorcycle repair shop. His shop also sold second-hand motorcycles and bicycles. He usually traveled to Thailand and looked for second-hand small pickup trucks. He bought one on each trip and took the vehicle to sell it in Myanmar. He could earn a good profit from the smuggling business. The trip usually took place in the monsoon season when his shop had only a few customers due to the heavy rain. Tun Myint is only one of many male returnees who live their lives on the move. They return to stay with their family in Myanmar but continue taking short trips back and forth for commodity smuggling.

Imagining the future has driven Burmese migrants to spend their savings on investment and make an effort to realize their return to Myanmar. Their experiences of the situation on the ground have been an unpleasant reminder of the uncertainty and ambiguity of the future. The improved socio-economic situation they see stands against the pitfalls of the national peace-building process. While returning to their home country is largely anticipated by displaced Burmese people, the realization is far from a linear process of return migration. The ongoing political and economic dynamics in present-day Myanmar enforce particular patterns of return mobility, which are rather complex and uncertain.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown how the return of Burmese migrants from Thailand to Southeast Myanmar has been configured by the complicated landscape of hope and future-making. The economic and political transformations in the reform-era Myanmar have generated factors of friction and traction that either support or impede the plan of homecoming and life-earning there. The Burmese return happens against the background of political reform, economic growth, and political influence of local armed groups. The return trajectory, in fact, experiences resisting forces, engendered through the flawed peace process. Return then becomes frictional mobility rather than straightforward return migration. The contestation of political power disrupts the newly emerging economic opportunities in their homeland. Existing constraints push returnees to make more efforts on their return plan, or even reconsider it.

The overall situation in Southeast Myanmar shows that ethnic armed groups remain influential agents. Their control over land and active involvement in the

property business, along with the land acquisition of return migrants, aggravate the conflict and increase social inequality in the region. The land rush has greatly impacted Burmese society and return migration. The Karen armed groups are dominant players in resource allocation for ordinary returnees, especially with regard to access to land and housing in Southeast Myanmar. Such business strengthens the financial and political power of these armed groups and the return opportunities of ordinary people grow more complicated. Contested political power intensifies the social inequality in Myanmar and further delays the probability of return for Burmese migrants from Thailand.

These circumstances bring about an unequal distribution of hope, allowing some Burmese to have greater access to resources than others. This article shows how their return mobility turns into a complex moving project. Hope for success of one person, through land investment, comes at the expense of the hopes of others. One thing should be noted here: The interest in returning to the home country is not a static idea, it may greatly intensify or attenuate over time. In the early years of open economic policies, Burmese migrants monitored actual changes at home and participated in the flow of homeland re-engagement. They now increasingly recognize that there are many obstacles awaiting them there. While some Burmese struggle to realize the possibility of future lives in Myanmar, others are still reluctant to pursue the full project of return migration.



REFERENCES

- Asian Development Bank. (2017). *Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2017: Transcending the middle-income challenge*. Manila: Asian Development Bank.
- Cassarino, J.-P. (2004). Theorising return migration: A revisited conceptual approach to return migrants. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 6(2), 253-279.
- Chia, J., Aung, Y. M., & Shawng, K. B. (2016). Myanmar's nascent democracy depends on federalism. *Kennedy School Review*. Retrieved from <http://ksr.hkspublications.org/2016/03/23/myanmars-nascent-democracy-depends-on-federalism/>
- Cresswell, T. (2010). Towards a politics of mobility. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28, 17-31.
- Dalsgård, A. L. (2014). Standing apart: On time, affect and discernment in Nordeste, Brazil. In A. L. Dalsgård, M. D. Frederiksen, S. Højlund, & L. Meinert (Eds.), *Ethnographies of youth and temporality: Time objectified* (pp. 97-116). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Flaherty, M. (2011). *The textures of time: Agency and temporal experience*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gashi, A., & Adnett, N. (2015). The determinants of return migration: Evidence for Kosovo. *Croatian Economic Survey*, 17(2), 57-81.
- Gough, K. van, Langevang, T., & Namatovu, R. (2013). Researching entrepreneurship in low-income settlements: The strengths and challenges of participatory methods. *Environment and Urbanization*, 26(1), 297-311.
- Gravers, M., & Ytzen, F. (2014). *Burma/Myanmar: Where now?* Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.
- Hage, G. (2016). Questions concerning a future-politics. *History and Anthropology*, 27(4), 465-467.
- Hannam, K., Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). Mobilities, immobilities and mooring. *Mobilities*, 1(1), 1-22.

Future-Making and Frictional Mobility in the Return of Burmese Migrants

- Hirvonen, K., & Lilleør, H. B. (2015). Going back home: Internal return migration in rural Tanzania. *World Development*, 70, 186-202.
- Kirzner, I. M. (1997). Entrepreneurial discovery and the competitive market process: An Austrian approach. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 35(1), 60-85.
- Kleist, N., & Jansen, S. (2016). Introduction: Hope over time – crisis, immobility and future-making. *History and Anthropology*, 27(4), 373-392.
- Lall, M. (2016). *Understanding reform in Myanmar: People and society in the wake of military rule*. London: C. Hurst & Co.
- Mya Mya Thet, & Pholphirul, P. (2016). The perception of Myanmar development on its return migrants: Implications for Burmese migrants in Thailand. *International Migration & Integration*, 17, 995-1014.
- Smith, M. (1999). *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*. London: Zed Books.
- South, A. (2008). *Ethnic politics in Burma: States of conflict*. New York: Routledge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prasert Rangkla is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University, Thailand. He is interested in migration and displacement along the Thailand-Myanmar border. His current research focuses on the moral economy of a Burmese immigrant community in Thailand.

► Contact: prasertran@gmail.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the financial support of this research granted by the Academic Research Division (ARD), Thailand Research Fund (TRF) [Grant no. MRG6080257]. I also thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.