

Environmental Damage and Poverty Migration among Myanmar and its Neighbors

The 'newer' migration

In recent years migration studies have theorized that 21st-century migration is following patterns that both incorporate and diverge from academic and policymaking explanations of late 20th-century migration.¹ The case of Myanmar, whose out-migration is well-known and well-enumerated, nevertheless shows both a less-known pattern of in-migration in rural areas as well as environmental (and not only economic) factors in both in- and out- migration.

James Clifford's earlier, Asia-Pacific-focused work *Routes*, published in 1997, was influential in modifying the conventional academic foci on migration. Addressing the "subjectivity" of the ethnographers of peoples and migrations and their subjects as more an issue of shared, though differing, ideas of movement and space, he brought a new awareness of the interplay between semantic webs purportedly possessed by fieldwork subjects and their would-be interpreters among scholars. He followed this work with a particular narrative of Native American migration in *Returns*, published in 2013. Both of these works open the door for new attempts to study and interview migrants in their own situations and to grasp the diversity of migration beyond push-pull factors. One burgeoning methodology within this new research initiative was that of ethnographic interviews with migrants. Clifford had revealed an extremely human, molecularly detailed side of interviewees and respondents. Newer works began to concentrate almost exclusively on the migrants' own narratives and to pull slighter, more localized explanations from them in the same mode as Charmaz's grounded theory. Here were the roots of 'new migration' ideas. With the wealth of published data becoming available from migrants worldwide, small and large differences between their experiences and general migration theory became more apparent.

While Clifford's work motivated others to look for variations on push and pull, much scholarship still concentrated on economic factors in conventional terms of income and remittances. The non-financial factors, or the less directly economic or quantifiable factors, in migration have begun to receive attention only recently. Among these factors are those relating to the natural and physical environment: climate

¹ See James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997) and *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013); Mrinilna Rai, RCSD, "New Diaspora"; "Theorizing Migration in Anthropology" by Caroline B. Brettell, in *Theories of Migration*, ed. Brettell and Hollifield; Mekong Migrant Network and Asian Migrant Centre, *From Our Eyes: Mekong Migrant Reflections 2000 -2012* (2012).

change, natural disaster, and environmental degradation. Attempting to derive 'environmental' explanations from migrants' own discourses unavoidably brings the researcher or interviewer into the realm of different semiotic worlds and differing conceptions of what is financial or economic and what is not, with a very fuzzy border between them. More importantly, a similarly fuzzy border emerges between past personal histories and present ones, as in the case studies here. Experiences may be voiced as repetitions of earlier (ancestral) stories, or along a continuum that includes past experiences that took place outside or around the self.

Is the 'new' migration, then, more a case of a new set of interpretations rather than new patterns among migrants themselves? Some would argue for the former. Seksin Srivattananukulkit, emeritus professor of political science at Chiang Mai University, and himself descended from ancestors who walked from China to Thailand, opined that 'this is nothing new.'² A Myanmar fieldworker who trained with our group in Shan State in 2011 at first expressed shock at finding walk-in, destitute Chinese without entry permits living under a tree, then weeks later recalled: 'my grandmother told me that she came in this way'. If this method of entry, and level of migrant poverty, is nothing particularly new, what of its changing extent and rapidity?

A fair amount of new migration theory has used ethnography to explore notions of choice and lack of choice among migrants. This includes the interrogation of the rational, or perhaps prosperous-nation, notion of choice itself. Definitions and implementations of choice such as Amartya Sen's would define the presence or absence of choices at all as being an indication of the level of the person's or group's well-being. Further specifications of choice include rational choice, assuming a 'better' choice among options. But the poverty migrant might have only 'bad' or 'risky' choices and virtually no options. Finally, the descriptions elicited from migrants themselves may frequently be biased (by the researcher) towards discussions of calculations in the choice *to* migrate, while the perhaps equally calculated or risky 'choice' to stay home is less queried.

In order to hypothesize that a particular migration pattern is new, one ought to be able to show not only that the migrants' demographics and their places of origin and destination may have changed or expanded; but also that the causes, effects and implications for the migrants and their origins and destinations are different from their previous patterns. What is less clear is whether such claims can be said to differentiate the actual migrants and their experiences from past ones, or rather to differentiate the current migration research from its predecessors. In this study, the demographic

²Seksin Srivattananukulkit, personal conversation, September 2012.

concentration on the poorest and on migrants from rural Myanmar to rural areas elsewhere differs not so much from previous historical migrations as it does from the foci of earlier research that focused on labor migrants who had some assets in the form of borrowing for broker fees, networks along the way or at the destination, and the possession of or desire to acquire work skills. The causes, effects, and implications of such migrations, however, can be said to differ in reality from other postwar 20th-century migrations in Southeast Asia. The role played by long-term environmental damage and climate change—not sudden-onset and temporary environmental stresses—and their corollary in slow-onset socioeconomic vulnerabilities leading to destitution, appear to differ markedly from the previous push-pull factors of economic necessity on the origin side and economic potential on the destination side. A major difference from economic migration here is the diasporic nature of environmentally-driven poverty migration, that is, the trend within this migration towards non-return, and either permanent mobility or long-term settlement at a destination. Diaspora in this context differs from the ability of previous, Western diasporas to gain access to a destination due to political considerations, but still shares with earlier theories of Diaspora a differentiation from vagabond and nomad movements. Blunt has also pointed out that the “‘new mobilities paradigm’ ...has sought to challenge both the ‘sedentarist’ and ‘nomadic’ production of knowledge” (684). One of the chief differences between the experiences of respondents in this study and the nomad theory is that they were not particularly rootless in the same way. A difference between environmental poverty migrants and diaspora theory is that the respondents here were less likely to be in a position to be re-formulating and preserving their ‘identities,’ if that word has meaning to them, but more likely to be in a position where they had to react, as quickly as possible, to expressed and putative views of their identities by potential hosts and employers.

Environmental diaspora

The issue of ‘homeland’ and of return differs widely among environmental migrants. Those who flee short-term, quick-onset environmental disasters may sojourn and then return; those who have experienced slow-onset, longer-lasting environmental deprivations may be neither able nor willing to return to a home that, in terms of sustenance, no longer exists. In this way their experiences are not readily explained in theories of diaspora that rely on a mobile population’s notions of a homeland and a new identity at the ‘hostland’ (destination) in Cohen’s work (2008) based on a putative relationship to an increasingly imaginary homeland.

In this sense, not only the destination area where migrants settle, but the spaces along the way also become blended past-present-future diasporic homes. These, unlike mere places of transit, do contain local environments that support their own societies, activities and work. The environmental diaspora, then, may be located everywhere that its paths and their users go, rather than being territorialized. In this sense it has often been linked to contemporary notions of globalization.

Appadurai's globalization took in the "shifting world...of tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups" (*Modernity at Large* 33) but cautioned that "even an elementary model of global political economy must take into account the deeply disjunctive relationships among human movement, technological flow, and financial transfers" (35). He argues that such disjunctures tend to be ignored in the scholarly literature, where productions of localities go with productions of local subjects who are thereby defined by such places (180 -181). Yet this would be a difficult task for anyone studying the poverty migrants here, as the production of a localized subject requires the fixity or sedentarization of a locality with its attendant local characteristics. It is more likely a temptation or a failing of the attempt to characterize migrants as being from just such a fixed and defined place of origin, whether they understand and agree in such definitions or not. Second, the migrants themselves move among localities that differ, not only from each other but in all probability from the scholar's notions of them; in a localized or territorialized theory, this would make migrants differ from their earlier—even one day earlier—localized identities. Although this may be valid in assessing how migrants are seen by others along the way or at the destination, it still leaves open the entire question of how migrants see their own movements and the places along the way.

Perhaps more tellingly Doreen Massey argued that globalization is itself "a politics of mobility and access":

For it does seem that mobility and control over mobility both reflects and reinforces power. It is not simply a question of unequal distribution, that some people move more than others, and that some have more control than others. It is that the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other groups.
(26)

Yet in the localized sense of a particular migrant's journey, it is along the pathways out of the desert, as well as at any destination or temporary place of sojourn, that the work may also be found; indeed it is increasingly located at such 'junctures,' which, to

the poverty migrant, may only be transitions. There is a new border economy—in the sense not only of geopolitical borders but also of economic, social, and temporal borders between the modern and the not-modern—that necessitates the presence of staying or frequently returning workers, transporters, and transmigrants (Thiesmeyer 93 -94). Not only the escape from environmental loss, but the actual perpetuation of it, through large-scale infrastructure projects, are engaged in at the lowest levels by the environmental diaspora.

In this context what plays the role of the ‘push’ factor—the environmental insufficiency at the place of origin—might be as situated and as multiple as the environmental factors that make up the migrants’ experience. Land of course; freshwater; life-sustaining air; forests; production-enabling weather patterns, any or all can decline or disappear and remain gone. They may do so for 3 main reasons: degradation as to quality and composition; pollution and contamination; and politically- or economically-motivated land transfers or confiscation. The third of these, land transfer, is not usually considered in scholarship on environmental loss and damage, and yet is equivalent to or greater than the amount of spatial area that is lost to rural dwellers through resource degradation and contamination. And whereas the first two are normally discussed along with some mention of anthropogenic causes, the third, though completely and visibly human-caused, is often not considered as one of the migration-inducing losses that accompany human-planned and executed economic change. From the migrants’ point of view, however, what matters more, in the sense of being something that only the migrants themselves (not their governing authorities) have to endure and cope with is the loss of a livelihood environment and the fact that the livelihood now has to be sought elsewhere. If their movement away involves crossing borders, it will become, and indeed now is, an aspect of globalization: more than a trendy, workers’-collective sort of globalization ‘from the bottom’ or a passive or forced response to globalizing economic forces ‘from above,’ it may produce what Castles (2000) called a “contradiction between globalization from above and globalization from below” (132). It is a vast and irreversible movement that in some ways makes the other forms of globalization possible.

Urry argued that “globalization should not be viewed...as one larger region replacing the smaller region of each society. Rather globalization involves replacing the metaphor of society as *region* with the metaphor of the global conceived of as *network* and as *fluid*” (33). However, sociological and anthropological writing taking up this point on globalization also makes use of ideas of technological and communicative networks and built infrastructures that compress time and space (distance, actually)

into speed and contiguity, as well as causing their users to rely upon the technology, the vehicle or the network to get where they are going. What of the migrant and the journey whose network is simply the path upon the ground, who is not, as Doreen Massey argued, “not ‘in charge’ of the process” (26)? And what can be said of non-globalized, non-networked migrants whose existence does not so much oppose globalization and transnationalism (indeed, they may be the largest constituency of it) as move beyond it? Van Hear’s 2014 summation also pointed out that “there tends to be a hierarchy of destinations that can be reached by migrants and asylum seekers, according to the resources – financial and network-based – that they can call upon”.

While work on ‘the new Diaspora’ has tended to concentrate on the movement of people from less-developed countries to more-developed countries, and on the continuation of earlier work on Greek, Jewish, and Latino diasporas, there is less work on new diasporas from and within East and Southeast Asia. There has also been a reliance on the notion that a particular diaspora within a particular country consists of persons who ‘share’ an origin in terms of place and genetic or cultural heritage. This may have been part of a theoretical project to create ‘natives’ or ‘local subjects’, as Appadurai argued in 1988 and 1996 (179), and thus native places: areas from which a nation’s current residents and laborers came but which are not in that nation and are somehow other and less advantaged. The present research, however, looks at persons and places that, while now being located in one same particular destination, are multifarious in their ethnicities and places of origin. It is common enough now to find both Shan and Palaung migrants settled with Lahu in the same villages of northern Thailand; to find Han Chinese with Akha and Lahu in northern Laos; and to find Chinese Wa (Va) settled in and around Shan villages in Eastern Shan State of Myanmar.

Work on East and Southeast Asian diasporas tends to focus on large diasporas such as those formed by the continued migration of Chinese to northern and western countries and Japan. One of the few works on a new diaspora within Southeast Asia was written by Mrinalini Rai concerning the communities from Nepal who originally migrated to Myanmar and then settled in Thailand.³Rai points out that whereas some globalization theories proclaim a new, more open movement of people as well as of goods, “National border controls and international cooperation on migration management have become highly restrictive. This movement caters for only a limited section of the society, as most people do not have the economic resources nor the political rights needed for free movement” (Rai 1). Rai’s work, like the well-known works of Castles and Cohen, also points to an ambiguity in the idea of migration being

³ Rai 2012.

either forced or voluntary, suggesting that some types of migration and diasporic settlement are combinations of both.

The role of environment in contemporary poverty migration

What is the role of climate, environment, and access to environmental resources in the 'environmental diaspora'? At the "Integrating Migration and Development – Diaspora as a Development Enabler" conference in October 2014, the UNCCD addressed "forced, environmentally-induced migration" and its officer in charge warned participants that "in the next 10 years some 50 million people are estimated to be at risk of displacement, if land and soils continue to be degraded at current rates, possibly leading to increased land degradation and insecurity."

Addressing these concerns, the IOM added climate change, and stated that "It is predicted that most climate- change-induced migration will be caused by slow-onset disasters and through cascading environmental effects" (4-5). We might add that these effects are likely to cascade not only from one environmental location or issue to another, but also from environmental to economic and livelihood issues.

As with many other issues that cross geopolitical boundaries, environmental issues have temporal and seasonal boundaries that they also transgress. Rivers and oceans of course cross geopolitical boundaries; they now cross temporal boundaries as well and bring on seasonal water shortages, pollution, or flooding on both sides of national borders. Such environmental hazards are not only physical but temporal. What were once seasonal risks and floods, necessary in rural areas to sustain floodplains for rice production, have extended into year-round, unpredictable, or extreme events; or have shrunk into occasional and inadequate rainfall and groundwater supplies. Any of these can, when prolonged over a period of years, contribute to what, in an extreme, might become the starving out of those local dwellers who were landless sharecroppers to begin with. This is a slow-onset disaster.

An example of a slow-onset disaster in the region is, like many, a disaster which seemed to outside observers to strike quite suddenly. By March of 2010, a severe drought had become apparent in Yunnan Province of China after the flood damage of 2008 - 2009. The drought also quickly became apparent in Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, or all of the Greater Mekong Sub region countries. Yunnan Province was very hard hit. Chinese newspapers showed then-Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visiting an area of Xishuangbanna where the reservoir feeding a small city had dried up to the point of showing 10-cm deep cracks in its lake bed. In the Delta area of Myanmar, 850 kilometers away, during a brief survey I made that May the formerly

fertile rice-basket area around Patheingyi had dried up to the point of looking like a moon landscape. From Kachin State in northern Myanmar down to the Delta, hundreds of people a day were reported dying from lack of water and from the extreme heat of over 50°C.

This can be called a slow-onset disaster for several reasons. The accumulation of hazards, some of them anthropogenic, over the preceding years occurred in an area of the Upper Mekong hosting vulnerable populations and ecosystems, and conforms to the pressure-and-release model proposed by Wisner et al. (2004). First, between 2006 and 2010 there were large-scale dams constructed along the upstream part of this route. Some are barrage or dam dams built for hydropower and to control the type of flooding that used to occur prior to the severe weather events of the 21st century. In recent years their attempts to control flooding have resulted in the release of large volumes of water which, although there is heavier-than-normal rainfall in the region, is popularly believed to negatively impact downstream countries, a belief that has led to political instability among border and riverine populations. Second, the continued and increasing impacts of climate change, especially warming trends, eventually contributed to the heat and drought. Third, the overuse of agricultural chemicals prevalent in the Upper GM leads to drying and cracking of the soil, making it less able to retain moisture and to desertify into a chemically different composition. Fourth, the deforestation that has taken place in some areas of the upper GM for development projects, including plantation agriculture, oil, gas and telecom pipelines, industrial parks, agro-industrial plantations, and urbanization, leads to the loss of watersheds, of natural methods for shade- and moisture-retention, and to greater exposure to sun and wind, baking the soil into a dry, heat-reflecting surface. As mentioned above, the 2010 drought in deforested and areas affected not only Yunnan and parts of Szechuan Province in China, but also spread as far south as the deltas of Myanmar and Vietnam, where seasonal river flows into the deltas had previously made flooding, not drought, more of an issue.

It is difficult to know accurately how many persons migrated away from home due in part or in full to the drought, and how many of these crossed borders, but the number measurably increased in and just after the drought year. According to statistics in Thailand, the country that is Myanmar out-migrants' most frequent destination, during the drought year 2010 and until 2011 the number of individuals from Myanmar temporarily registering for work in Thailand jumped to over 900,000, whereas in the years immediately preceding and following 2010 – 2011, it averaged 500,000 persons

(not including unregistered, undocumented migrants).⁴ For Malaysia, the second most common destination of Myanmar migrants, the number of Myanmar nationals on temporary employment passes jumped from approximately 5% of the foreign workforce in 2008 to over 10% in 2011.⁵ For China, which is now up taking a growing number of Myanmar rural migrants, the number residing in China in 2011 was an unexpectedly high 39,776, putting Myanmar rural emigration to China just behind its largely white-collar migrations from the Republic of Korea, the U.S., and Japan.⁶

Chinese net out-migration from the drought-stricken province of Yunnan was, from 2000 to 2010, -0.11%; net migration or growth (net migration divided by population growth) was -16.2%; 10-year growth 3,090,000; the 10-year net migration -498,000. Although areas such as Hubei and Anhui show much higher rates of out-migration and population loss, the out-migration from Yunnan is significant, as its relatively higher rate of population growth was still offset by out-migration.⁷ Further, it is also partly comprised of poverty migration and does little to relieve destitution. Biao Xiang pointed out at the end of 2014 as “unskilled migrants are subject to tight controls and recruitment procedures that are complicated and costly for migrants....low- or unskilled migrants have little opportunity to settle overseas, and their migration journeys, both outward and return, are tightly controlled,” one may conclude that “emigration from China is increasingly a means of reinforcing and reproducing social inequality rather than a means of mitigating it.”

No settlement, no return

A further concern, briefly mentioned earlier in this work, is that many environmental migrants fail to benefit from migration, in some cases because of environmental degradation that has occurred, or begins to occur, at their destinations. A case in point is the Delta area of Myanmar, where a cluster of villages outside Patheingyi were the destination of rural dwellers from further down the Delta who had fled Nargis Cyclone in 2008. Most were illiterate and unskilled, and had neither assets nor, thanks to Nargis, any surviving social capital back home. Arriving at an area of tiny villages 6 kilometers outside Patheingyi and building small houses with their own hands on its waste ground, they soon found that the area was increasingly prone to droughts and floods, rendering their tiny farm plots uncultivable. On my first visit there in May

⁴ Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of the Kingdom of Thailand, December 2011 / June 2012, quoted in Chantavanich and Vungsiriphisal 251.

⁵ Institute of Labor Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA) 6.

⁶ Shen, 2011.

⁷ Fischer, pp. 12 – 14.

2010, at the height of the extreme drought, men and boys who could find work were working construction in Patheingyi (to which they walked back and forth) for 2,000 kyats per day (less than \$2 USD) while girls and women, while caring for the smallest children, did whatever work they could pick up at nearby or in construction, some receiving only 500 kyats (\$.40) per day. Born and raised to farm, they could not find, after moving, adequate farm labor opportunities – not because their new home wasn't rural, but because of its worsening climate conditions.

Such environmental conditions do not allow migrants, most of whom migrate as entire families, to support their families to a level at which their children can go to school. This makes it more likely that the children's generation will repeat their parents' destitution.⁸ Moreover, while environmental migration continues, and some migrants find themselves as destitute after migration as they were before, the younger generation is growing up and increasing the ranks of destitute environmental migrants. Whether this would happen to the Delta migrants without the double punches of the cyclone and the drought is impossible to say, but the environmental damage certainly, in addition to having killed some of them, did nothing to assist them or their children to participate in the modernizing economy.

Another example from the same district illustrates this point. Environmental destitution hits hardest at those who are already experiencing marginal subsistence. A household I interviewed in the Delta that consisted of a middle-aged father and his sons was located on rice-producing land, most of which had been converted to plantations now managed by foreign or absentee landlords and on which the father now worked as occasional hired labor. The 2008 cyclone that had water-logged some of the land he had worked earlier, causing him to move to the plantation area where he now lived in a self-built hut with 3 walls. At the time of the interview, the subsequent drought year had also taken its toll on the soil of the plantation, which already had chemical-use issues. He was surviving without income by continuing to take out loans from local informal lenders such as the plantation owner, which he could not repay. His son had gone to a nearby brickyard where he earned subsistence wages. Whereas the International Organization for Migration provides examples showing "that migration is not just a failure in terms of adaptation; it is also one of the possible adaptation strategies to climate and environmental change" (2010: 11), there are still examples of destitution that continues or increases in migrants' lives due to environmental damage.

⁸Okamoto found that according to a previous census, outside Yangon and in the Myanmar delta "landless laborers were 42.0-44.5 per cent of those engaged in agriculture, and they depended on agricultural wage labor for a living" (21 – 22).

Not only was this household still poor, as they had indeed been before the cyclone, but they were by their own account now poorer. Migration away from the cyclone's worst-hit area had landed them in an area now hit by the longer-lasting and more widespread impacts of climate change and environmental mismanagement, which were proving much harder to escape.

The International Organization for Migration, discussing international frameworks dealing with environmentally-caused displacement, stated:

It should be noted, however, that most of these instruments only cover displacement caused usually by sudden-onset natural disasters, and do not take into account displacement and migration caused by slow-onset environmental degradation (such as desertification and river bank erosion or even movement caused indirectly by climate change). It is predicted that most climate- change-induced migration will be caused by slow- onset disasters and through cascading environmental effects; there is a critical need, therefore, to formulate a framework for protecting the rights of not only those who are displaced due to sudden-onset disasters but also those who migrate away from slow-onset environmental degradation.

Still, this is addressing the rights or needs of migrants as they move or after they reach a destination. The rights, needs, and even the fundamental situations of migrants before they move – when they are not yet defined as "migrants"— proved much more difficult to specify. Without on-the-ground representative sampling both of those who migrated and those who stayed, their situations and consequently any discussion of appropriate measures would likely not be possible. Hence one thorny issue is that of how, where, and when to define people as "migrants." Logically, such a definition, predicated as it is on the notion that people undertake a certain, non-normative activity at certain times and not daily, would also necessitate the researcher identifying "pre-migrants," "potential migrants," "non-migrants," or "post-migrants" among others.

This discussion returns us to the obvious issue that as far as historiographers and anthropologists have found, human groups have migrated throughout their history. Thus why classify migrants as a special group needing special understanding and special policies? One of the short answers given by post-war scholars was that current definitions of migration and migrants are linked to current legal definitions of nation-states and their boundaries, and thus require special legal, social, and economic

perspectives. On this view, whereas nation-state boundaries and jurisdictions were seen as fuzzy at their outer extremes, nation-state formation had made precise and razor-sharp lines to divide territories, economic resources, and people.⁹

The long answers to why we define a category called “migrants,” on the other hand, are extremely diverse. Within the push-pull theories of economic and political migration there were attempts to define migration as something needing explanation. The explanation could be based on the hope of financial gain, desire for skill building, or on the seeking of peace and security; in other words, on what was sought and what was to be avoided. Accompanying these explanations were the choice or agency explanations, in which migrants were seen to make decisions based on calculations and choices, normally within the household, where one or more members were designated to migrate while others necessarily stayed behind. These theories differed substantially from those seeking to explain refugee movements and those seeking to explain displacement, normally defined as political or conflictual displacement. Within economic and political migration theories there were designations for migrants, divided into subcategories that included labor migrants; relatives, neighbors, and children of labor migrants; white-collar migrants; globalization-driven job seekers; and others, ranging from participants in short-term and U-turn migration to long- and permanent stay migration, or diasporic migrants.¹⁰

The present work suggests relatively new types of migration that in some cases grow out of, and in some cases differ sharply from, these recent explanations. Mainly the migrants discussed here are rural migrants who often go, not only to urban and peri-urban job locations, but to other rural areas and plantations. They are, or have become, nearly destitute in their sending areas, and may have no or almost no education, skills (other than tenant farming), or networked connections to assist them. In other words, this study asks what is migration-driving destitution among such people? If they have traditionally survived as landless or smallholder cultivators, lacking property, education and other skills at home, what could make them “more” destitute, destitute enough to pack up and leave?

Living in differing or undifferentiated environments of space and time

The destitute informants’ migration styles in this study were perhaps not pioneering; they were certainly not uncommon to each other or to their hosts at their destinations. Their ways of living day-to-day in transit or at a destination were often pursued without

⁹ Wolters 1999; Sturgeon 2005.

¹⁰See Cohen, 2008, and Douglas Massey, 2004.

surprise, shock, and perhaps somewhat lacking in incremental and learned adjustments. Some of them had ended up in places where the natural and rural environment was a recognizable version of the one they had left, if remembered at a time when it had still been viable; these were more likely to be rural Chinese and ethnic minorities heading south, and Shan entering Thailand. Blunt describes this as a kind of transnational citizenship irrespective of national laws and boundaries: “transnational citizenship spans legal, regulatory and political geographies alongside social relations and cultural meanings, values and practices” (688) Others, however, enter economically, environmentally, and socially different spaces, as with the Burmese and Shan now entering China.

Space is itself a type and a determiner of movement, whether of the eyes, of the mind, or of the body--the ‘environment’ of spaces and of movement within and between them. When a space becomes inviable, you may try to obtain another one. If you are a landless laborer in the GMS, you cannot do this by buying real estate or going somewhere on vacation or legally moving house and property. To get a better, more endowed climate and space, you move yourself, and your space – the areas in which you traverse and sojourn -- moves with you.

Likewise, if your past and present can become inviable, then so can your own present time. To avoid this, you want to keep *it* moving. You can do this by keeping yourself moving. Time stands still when you are home doing nothing, producing nothing, consuming nothing. Urry described it as follows: “Biological time is thus not confined to ageing but expresses the nature of biological beings as temporal, dynamic, and cyclical. Change in living nature involves the notions of becoming and rhythm city” (120). Several migrants in this study, who had observably gained nothing financially from migrating, expressed the wish that time would advance or change. The hope was that experiences, places and people would newly appear, advance and change, or that they themselves would experience advance (moving ‘forward’) and change. Migrating was, apparently, doing this for those who responded that they would go abroad again even without financial gain.

You don’t bring family pictures or other written or non-written materials with you. The border dwellers that had pictures and oral histories were those who had settled for a long time. The migrants simply had a family member’s phone number by which to connect themselves to the former place. If they lost their phones, or the number of the person at that place, they became disengaged, floating free. This is scary. On the other hand, such disengagement from inscribed identity may work to help counter the authorities’ claim that you are from somewhere else and should be sent back; there

will be no legal way for them to prove who you are and where you are from.

When environments slowly grow inviable: slow-onset disasters and poverty migration

In 2010, the authors of a study for the International Organization for Migration noted that “environmental migration...includes a wide spectrum of movements from forced to voluntary and mass migration (following sudden-onset disasters) to temporary and circular movements (in the context of slow-onset processes),” and also added “multi-hazard” circumstances to the drivers and vulnerabilities of environmental migrants (IOM 2010, 14). In other words, neither a fixed time-frame nor a single cause of migration is likely to be found. In a similar study, the ADB emphasized that slow-onset disasters are environmental in the broadest sense: “the longer-term processes which see an incremental decline in the ability of an area to provide livelihood” (37). Rural migrants from such situations confront environmental hazards such as polluted waters; climate change and extreme weather; and more broadly, other livelihood-impacting issues such as land loss and confiscation.

Slow-onset issues faced by migrants and potential migrants are thus ‘environmental’ ones, in a broader and perhaps more rural definition of the environment. Soil erosion, soil degradation, repeated water shortages, repeated floods, and extreme heat that continue and perhaps worsen over a period of time are not the sudden and astonishing phenomena of natural disasters. Yet due to their long-term and geographically widespread nature, they eventually produce more loss, damage and destitution and thus affect larger numbers of people. For example, from 1885 until 1924, approximately 200,000 Japanese permanently migrated abroad mainly from western Japan, where repeated droughts and loss of cropland had contributed to severe famines¹¹; this long-term number is nearly 10 times higher than the rate of casualties in the sudden-onset earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011. Further, slow-onset disasters are not only, or not purely, environmental. Blaikie et al. pointed out over 20 years ago that economic and other sorts of vulnerabilities make disasters what they are, that is, potentially lethal to human communities.¹² Gradual economic decline in some regions or some countries, as with that accompanying the ageing and depopulation (mainly of working-age people) now faced by Japan, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam, drive some, usually younger, populations of those areas to migrate domestically. Some Mekong Subregion countries in particular face economically-damaging rural

¹¹ Takaki 1998; Tsurutani 1989.

¹² Blaikie, Cannon, Davis and Wisner 2004.

depopulation even while their population is growing; or, in another view, because their economies have already become non-competitive in the wider cash and market systems, they depopulate. Finally, the loss of bases for livelihood in rural areas – land, rivers, and forests not only degraded but sold off to projects that will hire other, more skilled workers – creates an economic vacuum where they have neither food nor money.

The New Diaspora and Imagined Migrations

Of the potentially millions of counted and uncounted migrants like those above, many no longer return home; or they return only for holiday visits. Whereas migrants from poorer areas who transmigrated to Thailand and other more developed countries often stayed in touch with their homes, sent remittances, and stated a wish to return home at some point, there is a growing number of migrants who do not seek a permanent return.

Yet the 'New Diaspora' may be neither a diaspora in the sense of communities settling permanently outside their areas of origin, nor in the sense of being particularly new. Destitute environmental migrants may seldom return home; may return home after a very long interval; or may never return home. But such migrants in the early 21st century do not generally start out with or end up in a community. Nor do they always go with the intention of arriving at a particular destination and staying at a particular workplace. Again, the newness of such migration may be partly in the eye of beholders like researchers, policymakers, and development aid workers. Something that had previously gone unnoticed by certain groups of people can, when 'discovered', be new.

One form of that such a newer diaspora takes is that of environmental migration. Poverty migrants from the upper GMS in recent years, and their relatives and neighbors who stayed behind, have more and more frequently mentioned the sorts of development-induced displacement that accompanies environmental degradation. More frequently than sudden-onset natural disasters the present research encountered narratives of eviction, loss, and damage. The large-scale dams that continue to be flashpoints of controversy in Yunnan, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, necessitated the displacement of nearby villages, but also brought about environmental and geophysical changes that caused displacement and migration without government or military interference. Most recently, the construction of parallel oil and gas pipelines across Myanmar into China has, according to villagers along the pipeline route who were interviewed in August 2014, caused some amount

of outmigration; the aboveground areas of the pipeline in the more populated areas of Shan State are in some places 500 meters wide, strictly posted, and dotted with security-guard outposts. The construction of these pipelines required that even larger areas of farm and village be torn up and people move away, resulting in prolonged local protests over a 2-year period. A third type of development displacement involves mining; many countries, developed as well as developing, have seen displacement become the expected result of large-scale mining, exploration, and refineries. China's Yunnan Province, the northern and eastern provinces of Thailand, and Myanmar's central and northern areas have been the recent sites of new or additional explorations for underground and mountain resources, mainly coal, petroleum, gold, and copper. The latter involves mountaintop removal. Finally, the legal, semi-legal, and illegal appropriation of protected forest and national park areas for rubber plantations has been the cause of migration in Yunnan, Myanmar and Laos.

Again, these operations cause displacement and migration in three ways. First is the actual, physical loss of place. Large-scale construction projects include the removals of mountain, of riverbanks and river islands, and of cropland / forestland or its soil. This means the physical disappearance of a certain amount of habitable, productive, or otherwise serviceable space on the surface of the earth. Necessarily, the people on top of this space or those who move upon it must relocate. Second, the waste products of some development projects can cause kinds of blockage or pollution that result in non-viable habitats. First, large-scale dams and their reservoirs may submerge hundreds of hectares of inhabited and productive land, store contaminated water at certain seasons, and unavoidably dry or flood downstream areas during extreme weather. Second, the energy pipeline construction area is, in one remote area of Myanmar where security fences and guards are not provided, overlaid with the debris of stone chips from its excavation to discourage local farmers from planting or harvesting on it. Third, surface mining, mountain mining projects and refineries, which have undergone rapid expansion in recent years, release toxic waste products like arsenic and nitrous oxide that affect human, animal, and plant life. The lignite surface (strip) mine and refinery in Lampang, northern Thailand, denuded the area of life and drove nearly 20,000 local people to seek hospitals treatment, or to move away, for the first several period of its construction and operation. Mountaintop removal causes surface and subsurface soils and sediments to settle on nearby areas and is accompanied, in Southeast Asia, by the dumping of the bulk of the removed earth into the watersheds and valleys below, making them more inaccessible.

Further, the permanent loss of the primary resources – food crops, non-timber

forest products, and of the environmental basis to produce them -- drives migration more urgently. Moving slightly away from an area that has been mined or dammed is not necessarily a life-changing event by itself; moving away from an area that has lost access to food and water, which entails much further migration, is a life-changer.

If we refer to Anderson's thesis that nation-states, in their unnatural modernity, are imagined communities, and are nations because of their borders, then migrations across borders may also be 'imagined' crossings reflecting the nation-state's need to keep its hegemony /sovereignty among other nations and maintain its bordered definition of itself. Looked at from a national security perspective, however, the perhaps equally imagined (that is, arbitrary) definition of migration as separate from travel is as necessary as the imagined community of the state, in order to maintain the simple distinction of what can or must belong to the state and what can't. If you get defined as a migrant you are somebody who actually belongs somewhere else, on the other side of the more or less arbitrary border, and you will need to prove that you have permission to be where you now are.¹³ Migrants become migrants because of the border. They are 'migrants' by virtue of their having crossed or wanting to cross a border, and this requires a legal change in their status. From this perspective 'migration' is a legal discourse, legally bordered more than it is geographically bordered, and entailing a change in their physical, not merely imagined, status.

Looked at from the migrant's perspective, then, the 'imagined' journey of legal and sometimes military definitions of movement is quite difficult to grasp. In addition to the difficulty of understanding the appearance of a modern, militarized, but still geotically invisible border, there are the equally new and unwelcome requests to interact with, pay, and obey unrelated persons—any or all of the categories of brokers, transporters, forest guides, fake document producers; customs and immigration offices, border patrols, and border police. And then there is the official transition from one world to the appearance of another, different world. In the northwestern province of Mae Hong Son in Thailand, once part of the Shan states and where the majority of the population still speaks Shan, a border crosser from Shan State in Myanmar is suddenly confronted with signs, official speech, and transport negotiations in Thai, though it still seems part of the Shan world. At times this vertiginous transition begins even before the border. The northwestern Shan of Kutkai and Namkham, approaching the Chinese border at Muse / Ruili, find themselves surrounded by Chinese shops, products, shopkeepers, and schools while still on the Myanmar side of the bridge. And finally, for the poverty migrants leaving behind the environmentally damaged world of

¹³ See also Sakboon on the complicated laws and perceptions of an 'alien' in Thailand (209).

a village, there is the imagined connection to the place of origin, now in its irretrievability to become as imaginary to the migrants as it is to the border agent designating them as people from 'another' place. The 'other' of poststructuralist theory lives on, even after post colonialism, as the Other place. The most destitute of migrants may never return, and their other (original) place as it will now be in imagination is paradoxically the emblem of its irretrievability. As Mrinalni Rai said of the new diaspora, trying to belong to your former place and people while in your new place, to "recreate and continue the imaginary connection, "is not the same as trying, wanting, or being able to return (Rai, 11).

Policies that help and policies that don't

Borders, home connections, and loss of origins are centrally important to the material strategies used to escape environmental destitution. In addressing climate and environment in migration, the International Organization on Migration makes the case that "any policy intervention aimed at addressing climate-induced migration should care not only for those who leave but also for those who stay, as they are often the most vulnerable" (46). Yet although many environmental migrants in the upper GMS are destitute and low-educated, they share one thing with their richer and more elite compatriots: lives in which national borders must, for reasons of economic survival, be gotten around or ignored as boundaries of livelihood spaces. Policies as well as practices throughout China and its southern neighbors show that while poverty migrants and environmentally displaced migrants cross borders informally and with no clear idea of how to get employment, the businesses and policy planners of the same region not only cross but re-draw their boundaries in hopes of greater economic development. Thus despite issues of rapid environmental degradation and human displacement in some areas, "the emphasis so far has been on regional economic integration" (Goh 2011, 393).

Also, as we have seen, however, border-dwelling migrants may not *be* "migrants"; they may consider themselves to be moving within the "same" area as their place of origin, in which case they would identify with the villagers who stay home (rather than with long-distance labor migrants). Yet because so many of these migrants become cross-border migrants in contemporary legal and border parlance, any legal means to deal with their needs or violations would need to be cross-border as well. In the case of economic and of environmental migration issues, however, there have as yet been no practical arrangements, multilateral agreements, nor binding legal frameworks at the level of the states concerned. Instead, the tardiness or lack of reform, remediation

or compensation policies for negative environmental impacts on human communities continues to burden the long-term economic and social well-being of the region.

References

Adey, Peter (2006) "If Mobility is Everything then it is Nothing." In *Mobilities*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 75-94, 2006. DOI: [10.1080/17450100500489080](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489080)

Adey, Peter, David Bissell, Kevin Hannam, Peter Merriman and Mimi Sheller (2013) *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*.

Anderson, Bridget and Michael Keith, eds. (2014) *Migration: The COMPAS Anthology*. Oxford: COMPAS (Centre on Migration, Policy & Society). <http://compasanthology.co.uk/>

Appadurai, Arjun (1988) "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place." *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory (Feb., 1988), pp. 36-49.

Appadurai, Arjun (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Public Worlds)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Asian Development Bank (2012) *Addressing Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific*. Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank.

Blaikie, Piers, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis, and Ben Wisner (2004) *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*. London: Routledge, 2nd Edition.

Blunt, Alison (2007) "Cultural Geographies of Migration: Mobility, Transnationality and Diaspora." In *Progress in Human Geography* (2007) 31 (5): 684 -694.

Castles, Stephen (2003) "Towards of Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation." *Sociology*, vol. 37 no. 1 (February 2003) pp. 13-34. DOI: 10.1177/0038038503037001384

Castles, Stephen (2000) *Ethnicity and Globalization*. London: Sage.

Castles, Stephen, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller (2014) *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chantavanich, Supang, and Premjai Vungsiriphisal (2012) "Myanmar Migrants to Thailand: Economic Analysis and Implications to Myanmar Development." In Lim and Yamada, eds., pp. 213 – 280.

Charmaz, Kathy (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage.

Cohen, Robin (2008) *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Fatima, Rabab, Anita Jawadurovna Wadud and Sabira Coelho (2014) "Human Rights, Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Migration: A New Paradigm." In *Issue in Brief*, International Organization for Migration / Migration Policy Institute, Issue No. 8 (March 2014).

Fischer, Andrew M. (2012) "Provincial Migration in China: Preliminary Insights from the 2010 Population Census." Rotterdam: International Institute of Social Studies, Working Paper No. 541.

Gemenne, François, Pauline Bruecker, and Dina Ionesco, eds. (2014) *The State of Environmental Migration 2013*. Paris: The Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations / Institut du développement durable et des relations internationales (IDDRI). In conjunction with the IOM.

Goh, Evelyn (2011) "Institutions and the Great Power Bargain in East Asia: ASEAN's Limited 'Brokerage' Role." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 11 (Sept. 2011), pp. 373 – 401.

Institute of Labor Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA), Malaysia, with Ximena Del Carpio (Task Team Leader), Rajeswari Karupiah, Mohamed-Ali Marouani, Caglar Ozden, Mauro Testaverde, and Mathis Wagner. (2013) *Immigration in Malaysia: Assessment of its Economic Effects, and a Review of the Policy and System*. World Bank, Social Protection and Labor Unit, East Asia and Pacific Region.

<http://psu.um.edu.my/images/psu/doc/Recommended%20Reading/Immigration%20in%20Malaysia.pdf>

International Organisation for Migration (2010) "Disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and environmental migration."

http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/DDR_CCA_report.pdf

Ishida, Masami, ed. (2013). *Five Triangle Areas in the Greater Mekong Subregion*. BRC Research Report. Bangkok: IDE-JETRO Bangkok Research Center.

Kniveton, Dominic, Kerstin Schmidt-Verkerk, Christopher Smith, and Richard Black (2008). *Climate Change and Migration: Improving Methodologies to Estimate Flows*. Geneva: IOM Research Series no. 33.

Le Texier, Marie (2014) "Dam-induced Migration in the Mekong Region." In Gemenne, Brücker, and Ionescu, eds., 127 – 139.

Lim, Hank and Yasuhiro Yamada, eds. (2012) *Economic Reforms in Myanmar: Pathways and Prospects*. Bangkok: Bangkok Research Center, IDE-JETRO. Research Report No. 10.

Massey, Doreen (1991) "A Global Sense of Place." *Marxism Today* vol. 35, June 1991, 24 -29.

Massey, Douglas (2004) *International Migration: Prospects and Policies in a Global Market*. London: Oxford University Press.

Okamoto, Ikuko (2008) *Economic Disparity in Rural Myanmar: Transformation under Market Liberalization*. IDE-JETRO Singapore: NUS Press.

Rai, Mrinalni (2012) "Interrogating Diaspora in Migration: The Burmese Nepalis in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand." Published online by International Conference on International Relations and Development (ICIRD), Thailand. Available at

<http://www.icird.org/publications/publications/publications> (mrinalni-rai_2)

Sakboon, Mukdawan (2011) "The Borders Within: The Akha at the Frontiers of National Integration." In Vaddhanaphuti and Jirattikorn, eds., pp. 205 –243.

Shen Haimei (2011) "Influx of International Immigrants Challenges China's Migration Policy." In *Brookings*, "Opinion." Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 8 September 2011.

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/09/08-china-immigrants-s>
hen

Sturgeon, Janet (2005). *Border Landscapes: The Politics of Akha Land Use in China and Thailand*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Takaki, Ronald (1998). *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Little, Brown.

Tsurutani, Hisashi (1989). *America-Bound: The Japanese and the Opening of the American West*. Translated by Betsy Scheiner with the assistance of Yamamura Mariko. Tokyo: The Japan Times.

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) / The Global Mechanism (2014) "Environmental Degradation Recognized as Major Driver of Migration." Posted 08 October 2014.

<http://global-mechanism.org/news-events/news/environmental-degradation-recognized-as-major-driver-of-migration>

UNCCD (2008) Expertise Internationale, Désertification, Migration et développement local: http://global-mechanism.org/edocman/migration_fweb.pdf

Urry, John (2002) *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-first Century*. London: Routledge.

Van Hear, Nicholas (2014) "Diaspora Formation: Rescaling and Re-placing." In Anderson and Keith, *Migration: The COMPAS Anthology*. Oxford: COMPAS (Centre on Migration, Policy & Society). <http://compasanthology.co.uk/diaspora-formation/>

Vaddhanaphuti, Chayan, and Amporn Jirattikorn, eds. (2011) *Transcending State Boundaries: Contesting Development, Social Suffering and Negotiation*. Chiang Mai: The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development.

Wolters, O.W. (1999) *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Studies*. Rev. ed. Ithaca, NY and Singapore: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Xiang Biao (2014) "The Upward Concentration of Chinese Emigration and the Rise of China." Oxford: *The Compas* blog, 23 September 2014.

<http://compasoxfordblog.co.uk/2014/09/the-upward-concentration-of-chinese-emigration-and-the-rise-of-china/>