

Unravelling the Dynamics of Border Crossing and Rural-to-Rural-to-Urban Mobility in the Northeastern Thai–Lao Borderlands

Soimart Rungmanee*

Puey Ungpakorn School of Development Studies, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand

ABSTRACT

A considerable number of migration studies to date have focused on either internal or international migration. Such studies tend to highlight the economic inequality that underlies human mobility, and hold that migration proceeds according to the rural-to-urban divide, as well as between nation-states. However, these approaches fail to describe how labour moves internally, internationally, and within and across sectors. This paper addresses this complexity by examining cross-border migration that takes Lao migrants from agricultural to service sectors, from the hinterland of Laos to the borderlands of northeast Thailand, and from Laos to Bangkok and other urban centres in Thailand. By drawing upon case studies in a border village in northeast Thailand and in two villages in Lao People's Democratic Republic, this study shows that Lao migrants engage in rural-to-rural migration at different stages of their lives and reveals how internal migration in Thailand leads to emigration from Laos. Although a relatively high wage rate in Thailand plays a critical role in human mobility across the border, there are other determining factors that need to be considered, including the historical context of the movement between the sending and receiving areas, geographical proximity, and a shared linguistic and cultural background

that supports cross-border migration and which complicates migration patterns.
Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Accepted 31 August 2015

Keywords: cross-border; migration; Thailand; Laos

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the linkages between internal and international migration and the overlapping patterns of rural-to-urban and rural-to-rural migration through labour migrations across the Laos–Thailand Mekong border zone. I argue that the distinct analytical categories of internal and international and the separating patterns of rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban are not enough to picture the movement of labour between Laos and Thailand. There are two aspects to this problem. The first is the connections between internal and international migration that lead to the out-migration of the rural Thai populace and the in-migration of Lao migrants who seasonally move across the Mekong River to find low-skill labour jobs in the Thai borderland. The second is that, while research into migration in Laos in general focuses on the movement of Lao people to urban areas in Thailand, resulting in an abundance of data on rural-to-urban cross-border movement, the flows of people between rural and urban areas are, in fact, non-linear and multi-faceted. In practice, many Lao people move across the rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban sectors, establishing further connections with many areas beyond

*Correspondence to: Soimart Rungmanee, Puey Ungpakorn School of Development Studies, Thammasat University, Bangkok 10200, Thailand.
E-mail: soimart.r@gmail.com

Bangkok, such as the provinces in southern and eastern Thailand. The geographical locations and porous Thai–Lao borderlands offer good opportunities for people in this area to move with very little difficulty. Analysis emerging from this research identifies complex aspects of migration decision-making and confirms the importance of understanding mobility as an integrated picture of internal/international, rural-to-rural/rural-to-urban, and circular migration. The paper shows that migration patterns in Laos and Thailand are more complicated than is usually presented, and it challenges the common oversimplification of Lao–Thai migration into rural–urban and migration between nation-states.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section provides a background of Thai economic development and immigration policies. The second introduces theoretical considerations, highlighting the links between internal and international migration and the overlapping patterns of rural-to-urban and rural-to-rural migration. The third describes research sites and methods. The fourth section describes the out-migration situation in Ban Fangthai (Thailand) and discusses the employment of Lao seasonal workers to fill the resulting labour shortages during the peak agricultural season. The fifth section investigates migration in Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) using case studies from two villages: a border village opposite to the Thai village and an inner Lao village. This section also examines whether or not migration to Thailand has become a common livelihood strategy in Lao villages. The blurring of internal and international migration is exemplified through case studies in the sixth section. I conclude by demonstrating that cross-border migration to Thailand from Laos is more akin to internal than international migration. My research on the border zones between countries cautions migration scholars to examine the conceptual separation between internal and international migration and to re-evaluate how internal and international migration relate to each other within specific sites and among specific groups of migrants.

BACKGROUND

Thailand initiated its first national economic development scheme in the 1960s, which led to the concentration of industrial and other economic

activities in Bangkok and its vicinity. This accelerated rural-to-urban migration from areas of low production to those of high production. The northeastern region of Thailand was the dominant supplier of migrants. However, Guest (1998) notes that the majority of migration in Thailand followed a seasonal migration pattern and the majority of north-easterners who migrated retained their house registration and were regarded officially as formal residents in their home provinces. Typically, these migrants returned home for a few weeks every year to take part in labour-intensive agricultural work and to help with the harvest; they also returned during holidays.

Since the 1990s, Thailand has continued to expand its export-oriented economy, including its market-oriented agricultural sector. This growth has required a large number of unskilled workers; however, this demand can no longer be adequately met by the domestic Thai workforce. Over the same period, an increasingly educated Thai population has become less attracted to low-paid and physically demanding jobs, including work in the agricultural sector. The result is a shortage of workers in rural areas as increasing numbers of rural Thais out-migrate to work in Thai cities or abroad (Rigg, 2001). As a consequence, Thailand has become the main destination for migrants from its poorer neighbours (i.e. Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar) who fill labour gaps in jobs such as fishing and fish processing, construction, domestic service, and tourism. Most of these cross-border migrants are employed in the agricultural sector. Southern rubber plantations and rice and fruit farms in other regions are the most intensive users of migrant labour (World Bank, 2006a, p. 8). The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare reported that in 2011, there were 1,950,650 registered immigrant workers in Thailand, including 905,573 from Myanmar, 106,970 from Lao PDR, and 235,521 from Cambodia (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 2011). These numbers do not include those migrants who have crossed the border illegally or who have entered the country legally but who overstay. It is extremely difficult to acquire this data, particularly for Lao migrants. Even though Lao migrants make up the smallest group of migrants in Thailand, it is very difficult to distinguish a Lao migrant from a northeastern Thai because of the strong linguistic, ethnic, and

cultural connections between the two places. Consequently, the real number of Lao immigrants is likely much higher than the official number reported by the Thai government. The International Organization for Migration (International Organization for Migration (IOM); 2012) unofficially estimated that there were over 200,000 non-registrant migrants from Laos in Thailand.

Recent migration studies and reports on Thailand have largely focused on international migration. Research conducted by Thai migration scholars (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005; Deeleen & Vasuprasat, 2010) as well as international organisations, usually highlights international migration and has adopted macro and economic approaches in analysing migration flows into and out of Thailand (IOM, 2005; UNDP, 2010). However, this focus leads to an over emphasis on the study of international migration trends while neglecting the linkages to internal movements. Because the great majority of the population in the sending migrant countries remains involved in agricultural activities in rural areas, and because Thailand is significantly more urbanised than its neighbours (with the exception of Malaysia), international migration to Thailand has been analysed primarily as a linear movement from rural to urban areas. In particular, most previous studies on migration from Laos to Thailand have identified migrants' aspirations for modernity as a significant push factor for migration (Rigg, 2005, 2007, 2013; High, 2008; Huijsmans, 2010). This focus reinforces the rural-to-urban model and results in a lack of empirical data on the links between internal and international migration. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by drawing on empirical evidence regarding migration between Lao PDR and northeast Thailand and to outline the overlapping patterns between rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban migration. The paper also contributes to rethinking the relative importance of a range of migration factors, including the historical context of the movement between the sending and receiving areas, geographical proximity, and the shared linguistic and cultural background that supports cross-border migration.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Tradition migration studies have focused on either one of two seemingly distinct analytical

categories: internal or international migration (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005; IOM, 2005; World Bank, 2006b). While international migration implies movement across national boundaries, rural-to-urban migration is a term used to describe population movements as a response to, and part of, the process of economic growth and the transition to urban society (Ginsburg, 1990). However, more recent studies show that internal and international migration may not be so clearly distinct, particularly because this simple classification cannot adequately accommodate the changing nature of state boundaries, differential border regimes, globalisation, and the technological and economic conditions informing migration. Consequently, investigation of both the macro process and micro decisions that drive and shape movement within and across national boundaries is important to our understanding of migration.

There is a small but growing body of literature that seeks to empirically and theoretically link internal and international migration. For example, Skeldon (2006) examines two scenarios: firstly, internal migration can lead to international migration, and secondly, international migration can lead to internal migration. He examines data from migration studies in South and East Asia and shows that internal migration in many ways gives fundamental support to international migration. Furthermore, he analyses how migrants in many countries often migrate internally as an initial step before moving to an international destination (Skeldon, 2006). At the same time, international migration can lead to internal migration because emigration of local people to more developed countries creates a labour gap that reinforces the migration of people from neighbouring areas. In another analysis, King *et al.* (2008) identified the similarities and differences between internal and international migration, and developed two integrated frameworks that link the theories and empirical data (i.e. the systems approach and integration theory) of migration and development. However, both Skeldon and King *et al.* argue that it might be difficult to use any single grand theory to incorporate all types of migration because migrants' journeys are becoming increasingly multiple, complex, and fragmented.

In addition, the empirical findings of many studies reveal the links between internal and international migration. For example, in their study

of migration patterns in Albania, Çaro *et al.* (2013) found that remittances from international migrants are not only used for household consumption but that they also support the internal migration of other household members. Similarly, in their study of international labour migration and internal migration patterns from the mountain and hill regions to the lowlands of Nepal, Poertner *et al.* (2011) contend that successful international migration to India supports internal migration within Nepal. While most research in Nepal focuses on rural-to-rural migration, particularly resettlement schemes and migration from the hills and mountains to rural areas, the study of Poertner *et al.* (2011) instead focused on rural-urban migration because remittances from international migration are a fundamental source of funding for family resettlement from the rural highlands to the more urbanised lowlands.

Drawing attention to the problem of simple categorisation of migration types, Skeldon (2012a) questions the ideas of one single transition from one to another and of the simple bipolar divisions between rural and urban and between agricultural and industrial. Such perceptions bring about the linear and deterministic analysis of migration types as international; domestic movement to the agricultural frontier; rural-to-urban; urban-to-urban and intra-urban; and circulation. Skeldon argues that migration in the 21st century is varied. In another paper, Skeldon (2012b) argues that circular migration is the most recent form of migration in areas where free movement is allowed across international boundaries. He rejects the European Union's migration policies to confine the forms of population movement within domestic, international, and short-term temporary migration. His work resonates with another empirical finding of dynamic migration that makes difficulties for government to adjust and implement rules and institutions to regulate the complex forms of migration. Examples include Duany (2002) who points out that the flow of people between Puerto Rico and the US is not one-way migration but is rather called circular, commuter, or revolving-door migration and Hugo (1998) who demonstrates the increasing complex forms of mobility in the Asia-Pacific region and the growing incidence of not just 'bilocal' but 'binational' movement.

There is, as yet, little data regarding possible connections between internal migration in rural

Thailand and international migration from neighbouring countries. There are studies conducted in Thailand under the rubric of 'rural studies' that focus only on migrants' experiences in the Thai rural context (Makpun, 2008; Latt, 2009; Taotawin, 2011), while studies based in Laos focus on push factors including intensifying economic integration, marketisation, expansion of infrastructure, and cultural motivations (Rigg, 2007; High, 2008; Huijsmans, 2010; Barney, 2012). Both these groups of studies fail to connect Lao migration to internal migration in Thailand. This has resulted in a significant gap in knowledge about the linkages between internal migration in Thailand and migration in Laos, particularly the full range of migratory movements (rural-to-urban, rural-to-rural, circular, cross-border, and transnational migration).

This paper aims to address these gaps and show how these links fit into a larger picture of internal migration flows from Thailand's rural areas to its cities and other growth centres resulting in the replacement of labour forces from the less diverse economic areas. Facilitated by the spatial characteristics of the Thai-Lao border, both in terms of border proximity, and in terms of culture and language similarities, the Lao migrants not only replace agricultural labourer jobs in rural Thailand but are also able to juggle between rural and urban areas beyond Bangkok. This paper will draw on biographical narratives to show how Lao migrants have negotiated their stays in Thailand and to examine the differences between working in the agricultural sectors along the Thai borderland and in off-farm sectors in Bangkok.

RESEARCH SITES AND METHODS

Labour migration was one of the thematic focuses for my PhD research (Rungmanee, 2014) on agrarian transformation in the northeastern Thai-Lao borderlands. The research aims to draw not only the connections but also the role that complex migration practices by those located across the Thai-Lao Mekong border zone has on agrarian patterns in the northeastern Thai-Lao borderlands. The original research sites were two villages¹ directly opposite from each other across the Mekong River: Ban Fangthai² on the Thai side and Ban Kaemkong³ on the

Lao PDR side. The fieldwork was conducted in 2010 and 2011.

I initially anticipated that migrants from Ban Kaemkong would cross the river through the local checkpoints. These checkpoints are operated for daily workers crossing to Ban Fangthai and other nearby areas who acquire wage labour jobs in the paddy fields. However, only seven out of the 120 Lao migrant workers who were interviewed came from Ban Kaemkong, the others came from seven villages scattered in inner Laos. Of these interviewees, 31 from Ban Laonua⁴ composed the largest group of migrants from a single location. I decided to focus on this group and later included their village as a third research site. This article draws from qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews and questionnaires that were conducted with 100 households in Ban Fangthai, 50 households in Ban Kaemkong, and 50 household in Ban Laonua. I also observed 10 Lao migrants from Ban Kaemkong and Ban Laonua in their workplaces in Bangkok. Telephone interviews were conducted with another four Lao migrants to acquire in-depth information and substantial data of the migration circuit.

Recognising that migration in the context of the borderlands was unique, the adoption of multi-sited ethnography as my research approach enabled me to develop a more nuanced understanding of Lao's migration circuit as it offered a broad understanding of transnational processes and the mobile subjects (Marcus, 1995; Falzon, 2009). However, managing access to multiple locations was a challenge. I was unable to follow the Lao migrants who migrated to various locations in Thailand because of limitations of budget, time, and information. For these reasons, my interviews with Lao migrants in Thailand were limited to two locations: the northeastern Thai borderlands and Bangkok. Thus, my research may have inadvertently omitted groups from other areas where migration patterns could be different.

CONNECTING MOBILITY AND MIGRATION BETWEEN BAN FANGTHAI AND BAN KAEMKONG

Ban Fangthai and Ban Kaemkong are located on opposite sides of the Mekong River. Village document revealed that the people of Ban Fangthai (in Thailand) originally either moved from Ban

Naam in Nakhon Phanom Province or from the current Savannakhet Province of Lao PDR in 1905, the period marking the abolition of slavery in Siam. Ban Kaemkong was originally a location on the riverbank where fishermen built temporary shelters for fishing. It was only in the 1920s that 16 families moved there permanently and built their houses on the riverbank. The landscape of Ban Kaemkong consists of rocks and hills, which limits the amount of land available for paddy fields. Most of the villagers originally worked in fisheries rather than rice production. Some residents owned land in a nearby village and invested in paddy fields or other crops. In 1979, the Lao PDR government established Ban Kaemkong as a border village and relocated many people from several areas for resettlement in the village. This move divided the population of Ban Kaemkong into two groups: the old villagers who built their home near the river bank and government officials who came to stay in the north of the village.

Villagers from Ban Fangthai and Ban Kaemkong are distantly related as well as economically and culturally interconnected. Rain-fed agriculture and fisheries are the major activities in the two villages. They have long been involved in small-scale trade, which continued even between 1975 and 1985 when the border was closed. The re-opening of the Thai–Laos border led to the growth of small-scale cross-border trade in Ban Fangthai, which was operated locally by village residents but loosely controlled by the local government administration. A local market and traditional checkpoints have been established since 2003. Later, in 2007, the second Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge that connected Mukdahan and Savannakhet provinces was opened. However, the traditional means of crossing the border over the Mekong River has persisted and has become a route for Lao seasonal migrants to access labouring jobs in Ban Fangthai and nearby areas. These movements have increased in response to local labour shortages caused by the growing numbers of rural Thais moving to find urban jobs.

Migration and mobility have previously been identified as an important feature of rural livelihoods (World Bank, 2006a, 2008; Kelly, 2011). For example, a number of scholars have revealed that migration and non-farm work in northeastern Thailand had become a crucial source of income by the early 1980s (Mills, 1997,

1999; Rigg, 2007; Grandstaff *et al.*, 2008; Rigg & Salamanca, 2011, 2012; Maneemai, 2012). This pattern of migration can be seen in Ban Fangthai, where domestic migration to Bangkok and its vicinity has been prevalent for decades.

The results of a survey conducted as part of this study in 2011 show that out of 100 households in Ban Fangthai, 58 had at least one family member who had migrated to work outside their home village for a period of time. The reasons for migration included household poverty, the unreliability of rain-fed agriculture, population pressure on land, and the low level of industrialisation in the northeast region. Of the 42 households without any family members working outside of the village, almost half (i.e. 22 households) had at least one return migrant.

The survey also revealed that the respondents were increasingly working in off-farm jobs, both inside and outside the village, and that these forms of employment were now the main source of household income. This shift was coupled with remittances from family members who had moved to work outside of the village. Of 58 households with at least one family member working outside the village, more than half (i.e. 32 households) regularly had additional income from remittances and 26 households had requested that their family member(s) remit money during the cultivation season.

Many scholars have pointed out that the villages in rural Thailand have moved away from the challenges of food security and subsistence agriculture (Rigg, 2001; Rigg & Salamanca, 2011; Keyes, 2012). The current critical perspective on Thai villages is that they are not poor, despite the fact that not all villagers are well-off (Walker, 2012). Thai villagers enjoy improvements in rural standards of living, particularly as electricity and water systems have spread throughout the countryside. This trend holds true in Ban Fangthai, where the villagers have diversified their livelihoods and have developed non-agricultural sources of income, although agriculture is still an important part of their lives and villagers still cultivate their land, at least partly because it remains cheaper to grow rather than purchase rice for consumption. As a consequence, the movement of villagers from farm to non-farm employment, and from rural to urban areas, has led to severe labour shortages in the agricultural peak season. This has transformed Ban Fangthai

into a receiving migrant community, which has enabled the villagers in Ban Fangthai to take advantage of their borderland position to absorb migrant labour from Laos.

MIGRATION FROM LAOS TO THAILAND: OLD TRADITIONS AND EMERGING PATTERNS

Grandstaff *et al.* (2008) point out that throughout the 1990s, the number of people in the northeast working in agriculture declined consistently. During this period, many people were taking less time off from off-farm work to return home to help with the transplanting and harvesting. Many found themselves facing long hours and hard work in the paddy fields, so they decided to remit money home to hire others to do this work. Consequently, traditional cooperative labour arrangements no longer function as an effective economic mechanism and, since the 1960s, they have increasingly been replaced by hired labour (Moerman, 1968; Sharp & Hanks, 1978; Ganjanapan, 1984). Even though local Thai labour is still available, the supply is unable to meet the high demand during the peak periods.

Ban Fangthai provides an illustrative example of the replacement of traditional reciprocal labour arrangements with a wage-labour system. The majority of village interviewees replied that they did not have time to cooperate with others. They also found it troublesome to have guest labourers because they had to prepare meals for them. Some said they started hiring labourers when their parents divided lands and let them manage the agricultural work on their own. Only eight out of the 100 interviewed households practiced semi-reciprocal labour exchanges with their relatives, and they now pay them the same daily wages as the usual labourers. After completing work on their own farms, the landowners had to work as labourers on their relatives' farms and earn the same rate of daily wage in return.

This growing labour shortage has led to the majority of farmers in Ban Fangthai depending on wage labourers from Lao PDR. Of the 100 interviewed households, 96 had hired Lao seasonal workers at least once. A total of 88 households regularly hired Lao seasonal workers almost every year, including 2010 (the year in which the fieldwork was conducted). Only four households never hired any Lao workers: one of

them was landless and the others had a small piece of land (less than three rai)⁵ that was managed by their families.

How the Lao workers are hired across the Mekong River reveals the changing nature of cross-border relations between the Thai–Lao border residents. Previously, the villagers of Ban Fangthai would ask for helping hands from relatives and friends living in the Lao villages. Less attention was paid to the equivalence between what one gave and what was returned; achieving an exact balance between the two transactions was rarely pursued. A labour debt might be returned in a different way, such as a share of next year's harvest. However, following the official re-opening of the Thai–Lao border in the early 1990s, the nature of labour management in Ban Fangthai and the relationship between Thai and Lao villagers has been transformed into a more strict monetary exchange paid in the form of a daily wage.

According to in-depth interviews with a selection of the Thai villagers, prior to the 2000s, most Lao workers came from Ban Kaemkong and other nearby villages located along the Mekong River. Consequently, it was practical for them to cross the border on a daily basis. However, the number of Lao labourers from those villages has dropped significantly over the last decade and they have been replaced by labourers from villages in inner Laos. In the 2010 harvest season, which lasted from late October to the middle of December, only seven of a total of 120 migrants came from Ban Kaemkong while another 12 came from other border villages not far from Ban Kaemkong.

The main reason why only a small number of people from Ban Kaemkong crossed the Mekong River to find labouring jobs in Ban Fangthai is the off-farm opportunities available both within and outside the village. A survey of the villagers' main occupations shows that almost half of the residential households in Ban Kaemkong (i.e. 80 out of 194 households) were those of government officials who did not have any social connection to Thailand; these households were also salaried. In-depth interviews with the households of 12 government officials revealed that only four had one family member who had worked in Ban Fangthai. The four, mostly women, had followed their neighbour's decision to gain new experiences in Thailand. The remaining cross-border seasonal workers in Ban Kaemkong consisted of less than 10 households who were either relatives

of Thai farmers, newcomer residents who were landless, or widows.

There are a number of factors behind the job diversification within Ban Kaemkong that began in the 1990s, ranging from the re-opening of the Thai–Lao border for trade and investment, the establishment of fertiliser and sugarcane factories owned by Thai business companies, and the privatisation of land for cash crops (such as sugarcane and rubber). These factors have led to the second phase of immigration of outsiders to Ban Kaemkong. The villagers in the nearby villages have been drawn to Ban Kaemkong to find labouring jobs. In addition, many Thai businesses have brought in educated staff, technicians, and some Thai labourers to work on the sugarcane plantations.

The immigration of outsiders has resulted in the emergence of businesses (such as grocery stores, local restaurants, and karaoke shops) owned by local villagers. The majority of owners of these new shops are relatives of government officials. For example, the biggest grocery store in the village was owned by a lady who had previously worked as a district health officer and who had decided to become a local trader in the early 1990s. Similarly, three restaurants and karaoke shops are owned by the wives of government officials. Another two restaurants are operated by the wives of local policemen. Some residents also operate small grocery stores. The more diverse economic opportunities have generated greater incomes for villagers.

The opening of the Thai–Lao border in the 1990s enhanced the out-migration opportunities of the young generation. As economic conditions in the village have improved, people are able to invest in long-distance migration to inner Thailand. Out of 50 households, 38 households had at least one family member working in Bangkok or other Thai cities as long-term migrants. Only six households stated that their family members circulated regularly between their village and Thailand. Economic factors and material needs (such as, money, jobs, house renovations, and other consumer goods) were the main factors driving migration. The influence of friends or neighbours who successfully received significant remittances also propelled migration. And as other scholars have noted, besides the lure of better economic opportunities in Thailand, consumerism and materialism are also very important to Lao villagers (Rigg, 2007; High, 2008;

Huijsmans, 2010). In this study, many of the young Lao people in Ban Kaemkong reported that they were not interested in low-paid farming jobs. In addition, although they often have the opportunity to work in fertiliser and sugarcane factories, many of the young people rejected this opportunity because they deemed it to be labour-intensive. At 80 Thai baht (THB)⁶ per day, the wages for these jobs were comparatively low.

Migration and economic development have transformed Ban Kaemkong into both a sending and a receiving area, which is similar to the experience of Ban Fangthai. While the young labour force tended to migrate to Thailand, the vacuum they left was filled by other migrants from within Lao PDR. Families that still worked on their farms had to recruit labourers from their surrounding villages. Many workers living in the Lao hinterland heard of job opportunities in Ban Fangthai through Ban Kaemkong villagers. In addition, the cross-border telephone network allowed Lao people living along the border to have access to Thai numbers so that they could contact people in Thailand. One regular procedure I noted during the rice cultivating season was people calling from Thailand early in the morning. This telephone call would be followed by groups of Ban Kaemkong villagers riding their motorbikes and calling for people who wanted to go to work in the Thai paddy fields. Another group who benefited from this migration were the boat drivers who charged a fee for ferrying the Lao passengers across the river. However, from what I learned, there was very little chance of encouraging people living in Ban Kaemkong to go, with the exception of the women mentioned earlier. Those villagers who received orders from Thailand had to go further than Ban Kaemkong or they called on Lao people living in other villages to let them know about the wage jobs along the Thai border. These activities subsequently led to a wider variety of Lao migrants crossing the border into Thailand.

THE BLURRING OF INTERNAL/ INTERNATIONAL, RURAL-TO-RURAL, AND RURAL-TO-URBAN MIGRATION IN BAN LAONUA

Migration to Thailand has become a common livelihood strategy in both Ban Kaemkong, which is on the Mekong River, and in Ban Laonua, my other study site further inland. But the patterns

of migration in these two villages are correspondingly different. While many households in Ban Kaemkong had become increasingly engaged in non-farm employment, many people in Ban Laonua typically still grew rice and diversified their income through migration. The differences in location, accessibility, and local employment opportunities shaped these patterns.

Location in the hinterlands and the lack of industrial and commercial opportunities did not provide local residents with many job opportunities. Therefore, the majority of households in Ban Laonua still worked in the agricultural sector. Following the re-opening of the Thai–Laos border, many of the local people moved to find jobs on the Thai border and in Thailand itself. Where they went depended largely on how much they could afford to pay (if they had more money they could afford longer distance migration). However, the young generation in Ban Laonua could not easily move away from agricultural work because it was difficult to find labourers to replace the labour gap during peak agricultural season. Consequently, some migrants still returned home during the cultivation seasons. My study has documented evidence of all types of migration (i.e. seasonal, circular, rural-to-urban, and rural-to-rural, both domestic and international). Meanwhile, the villagers' movements frequently fell into more than one category of migration.

The group and individual interviews revealed that more than half of the migrants from Ban Laonua ($N=31$) who went to work in Ban Fangthai in November 2010 had made the move two or more times. Seven migrants had recently returned from Phang Nga and Phuket provinces in southern Thailand and from Bangkok, and the rest were moving around between Bangkok and the border provinces in northeast Thailand. When they were asked about their next work destination, five participants replied that they would go back to their wage labour jobs in Thailand, mostly to work in factories, in restaurants, and on construction sites. The rest were unsure when they would return to Bangkok because they wanted to take a short break in their home village until they were ready to leave again or had to leave because of lack of money; therefore, their movement was contingent.

More in-depth information about the degree of geographical scope and its impact on migration

patterns came from the ethnographic fieldwork and survey in Ban Laonua between January and February 2011. The survey of 50 households revealed that 15 had their family member(s) follow a circular migratory route because they found it difficult to find wage labourers to replace them during the peak agricultural season. Narratives from the Lao migrants reveals that short distance migration to the Thai borderland and longer distance to Bangkok brought them into risky negotiations of legality and illegality, which they had to carefully negotiate. One of the migrants, Whai, a 28-year-old man, from Ban Laonua reported that he had never been to Bangkok and had never wanted to go because he had seen many people who were arrested by the Thai police and were deported back to Laos with a big debt. He thought working on the Thai border is more secure. He had never been arrested over the 10 years since he had started working in the Thai farmland.

This glimpse of Whai's story illustrates the stories of many of the Lao migrants from the hinterland villages who headed for the Thai border for agricultural work, hoping to earn some money during a temporary stay. Most of them were undocumented migrants who came to Thailand by crossing the Mekong River. Some crossed during the night or in the early morning, hoping to escape the Lao border police. Many negotiated the border crossing by paying money to the Lao soldiers. They typically paid a higher boat fee than the normal rate (the local rate was 40 THB per ride but these migrants paid 100–300 THB). These workers had to pay a bribe again when they crossed the river back to Laos. However, they all said that it was worth paying to obtain a chance to earn money on the Thai borderland. Even though they knew it was illegal to cross the border and to stay overnight across the Thai border, they viewed it as acceptable because it was the normal practice of the Thai–Lao people to travel across the Mekong River and because a wage paying job was important for their livelihoods.

Socio-economic change and the new opportunities from regional integration have complicated the migration patterns from Laos to Thailand. These patterns are often circular and negotiate the border of legality and illegality as illustrated by the following examples from my interviews.

Mr Rae (aged 29) and Mrs Perd (aged 23) from Ban Laonua worked in Ban Fangthai in November

2010. I struggled at first to determine whether they were Thai or Lao. The way they dressed looked fashionable, and they were both fluent in Thai with little or no trace of a Lao accent. Having spent 8 years in Bangkok, they had seldom returned to work on the farm until that year, when Perd's mother called them to come back to Laos because of the lack of labour in the village. Upon completion of work on their own farms, they moved to Ban Fangthai, following their neighbours to gain experience working on the Thai paddy fields.

As I was carrying out the survey in February 2011, Perd and Rae left for Bangkok along with large number of the young migrants who were in Ban Fangthai in November 2010. Returning to Bangkok some weeks later, I went to a Western restaurant in one of the most popular tourist areas to see Perd and another three migrants from Ban Laonua. One of them was Lhai, a 16-year-old boy who I had met twice before in a paddy field in Ban Fangthai in June and November 2010. He was working as a cook, grilling steak and making spaghetti. Perd and Lhai said they wanted to collect money to buy new land and to make house improvements. They could not say whether or not they would return to Ban Laonua again in the next rainy season. The decision to leave or stay depended on their parents, who would ask them to go home or tell them to stay. Perd and Lhai had travelled without documents for many years and had never been arrested. However, in 2011, they paid approximately 3,000 THB for a passport and crossed the border via the Friendship Bridge as tourists. This allowed them to stay in Thailand legally for 30 days. Neither had a work permit, but the appearance of the Lao migrants and the way that they spoke make it very difficult for Thai citizens to distinguish whether they were from northeast Thailand or Laos. However, they said there was a possibility that the police could distinguish them.

Previously, the majority of Lao people crossed the border illegally with the help of brokers. Currently, although some still migrate illegally, the majority enter the country legally using Lao passports. However, many legal migrants have overstayed and have failed to register themselves on the Thai labour system. Even though they were permitted to stay for only 30 days, in practice, most of them overstayed the time period from 3 months to a year. When they wanted to return home, they acquired a certification of Lao

citizenship from the Laos Embassy in Bangkok and bribed the Thai and Lao police at the checkpoints along the way.

However, legal stays and work permits do not allow the Lao migrants to travel home easily. Armed with telephone numbers from families in Ban Kaemkong and Ban Laonua, I contacted four people who agreed to talk to me. Two were a couple who were working as domestic workers, one was a teenager aged 18 years who was working as a gardener in a plant nursery not far from Bangkok, the last worked in a massage shop. The Thai employers registered and kept their passport; therefore, they did not have much freedom to move and change jobs when compared with the illegal migrants.

Interviews with the Lao migrants who moved only in and around the Thai borderlands and with the Lao migrants in Bangkok showed some of the differences between short-distance migration along the Thai border and long-distance migration. Firstly, although both groups were illegal migrants, they experienced different levels of risk. Basically, migrants who travel further have more risk of being arrested and/or being cheated. Levels of legality depended on location. Secondly, all of the case studies mentioned earlier demonstrate the multi-layered aspect of mobility in Lao PDR. Attending to the migrants' narratives, in this instance, not only nuances the conventional explanation of migration but also illustrates the dynamics of migrants' decision-making and the complicated nature of such movements as migrants, acting as individuals as well as household members, negotiate multiple at times contradictory, needs, desires, and constraints. In particular, such narratives show that Lao–Thai migration is not simply unilateral, rural-to-urban movement, but multilateral given that many of the same individuals also engage in rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban, cross-border, and transnational movements in their journey to find livelihoods. The complexity and ambiguities of Lao migrants in Thailand reveal the limitations inherent in theorizing 'internal' and 'international' migration separately.

CONCLUSION

This paper draws attention to the links between internal and international migration and shows that internal and international migration need to be studied and understood in relation to one another

as they are linked in complex ways. As some scholars such as Skeldon (2006) and King *et al.* (2008) have highlighted, the conventional views embedded in contemporary migration studies, which mainly present migration as falling under the dichotomies of internal and international migration, are not enough to understand the migration situation. Some scholars such as Çaro *et al.* (2013) and Poertner *et al.* (2011) have explored the links between internal and international migration showing that remittances from migrants working overseas are one of the key factors supporting internal migration by family members. This case demonstrates that migration has become important to the livelihoods of both Thai and Lao people. Industrialisation and the export-oriented economy of Thailand in the 1980s have driven rural–urban migration of the Thai population. In the contemporary era, the Thai economy has extensively used cheap migrant labour while the Thai population has moved to middle class work. This paper points out that migration in a northeastern Thai border village and agricultural labour shortages resulted in the cross-border migration of Lao workers. The Lao migrants have to weigh the risks between migrating to the border region (and agricultural jobs in that zone), which operates as a sort of quasi-internal migration location or a transitional zone, that is still international migration but functions as a space 'between' internal migration within Laos, or another form of 'international' migration that involves moving to Bangkok or deeper into Thailand and away from the border. The academic distinction between internal and international migration obscures and erases this zone of ambiguity.

Clearly, the linkages between internal and international migration are embedded within the case study. However, the paper argues that the distinction between internal and international moves between Lao PDR and Thailand is blurred, not only because of border proximity but also because of ethnic and cultural similarities. In the case of the Lao migrants, going to Thailand was likely to be perceived as an opportunity to go to another city. This was seen as a preferred option to going abroad because most of them could speak Thai and they shared many similarities to Thai people. This cultural and linguistic 'blurring' and 'overlap' makes negotiations of the internal/international migrant label more ambiguous. This advantage also adds an important dimension to

understanding migration in the Lao–Thai context, ranging from the alternatives for the Lao migrants to participate in seasonal, circular, short-term, and long-term migration in different locations in Thailand and the everyday interactions between Thai employers and their Lao migrant personnel. However, the historical, cultural, and linguistic connections between the Thai–Lao people were not sufficient to eliminate their status as migrants in another country. Lao migrants must negotiate very real gatekeepers in their migration experiences.

Following Lao migrants from Thai border to their village and then to Bangkok enabled me to unravel the full range of migratory movements and the practices of the same individuals in many types of mobility (rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban, cross-border, and transnational migration). I suggest that future research in migration between Laos and Thailand and elsewhere in the region would likely benefit from undertaking ethnographic research that closely examines the overlapping patterns of mobility and the linkages of internal and international migration in order to produce a clearer picture of human mobility.

NOTES

- (1) All village names and interviewees' names are pseudonyms.
- (2) Ban Fangthai is approximately 25 km from the provincial capital of Mukdahan Province, Thailand.
- (3) Ban Kaemkong is approximately 30 km from the provincial capital of Kaysone Phomviharn Province, Lao PDR.
- (4) Ban Laonua is in Xeno District approximately 35 km from the Mekong River.
- (5) One rai is equivalent to 1,600 square metres (i.e. 40 by 40 m).
- (6) US\$1 = 32.75 THB (Thai Baht) at 13 February 2015.

REFERENCES

- Barney K. 2012. Land, livelihoods and remittances. *Critical Asian Studies* 44: 57–83.
- Çaro E, Bailey A, Van Wissen L. 2013. Exploring links between internal and international migration in Albania: a view from internal migrants. *Population, Space and Place* 20: 264–276.
- Deeleen L, Vasuprasat P. 2010. *Migrant Workers' Remittances from Thailand to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar*. International Labour Organization: Bangkok.
- Duany J. 2002. Mobile livelihoods: the sociocultural practices of circular migrants between Puerto Rico and the United States. *International Migration Review* 36: 355–88.
- Falzon M. 2009. Introduction: multi-sited ethnography: theory, praxis and locality in contemporary research. In *Multi-sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*, Falzon M (ed). Ashgate: Farnham; 1–24.
- Ganjanapan A. 1984. The partial commercialization of rice production in northern Thailand: 1900–1981. Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, Ithaca.
- Ginsburg N. 1990. *The Urban Transition: Reflections on the American and Asian Experiences*. Chinese University Press: Hong Kong.
- Grandstaff T, Grandstaff S, Limpinuntana V, Suphanchaimat N. 2008. Rainfed revolution in northeast Thailand. *Southeast Asian Studies* 46: 289–376.
- Guest P. 1998. Assessing the consequences of internal migration: methodological issues and a case study on Thailand based on longitudinal household survey data. In *Migration, Urbanization and Development: New Directions and Issues*, Bilsborrow R (ed). UNFPA: New York; 275–318.
- High H. 2008. Dreaming beyond borders: the Thai/Lao borderlands and the mobility of the marginal. In *On the Border of State Power: Frontier in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region*, Grainsborough M (ed). Routledge: New York; 75–100.
- Hugo G. 1996. Asia on the move: research challenges for population geography. *International Journal of Population Geography* 2: 95–118.
- Hugo G. 1998. The demographic underpinnings of current and future international migration in Asia. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 7: 1–25.
- Huguët J, Punpuing S. 2005. *International Migration in Thailand*. International Organization for Migration, Regional Office Bangkok: Bangkok.
- Huijsmans R. 2010. Migrating children, households, and the post-socialist state—an ethnographic study of migration and non-migration by children and youth in an ethnic Lao village. Ph.D. thesis, Durham University, Durham.
- IOM. 2005. *Migration, Development and Poverty Reduction in Asia*. International Organization for Migration: Geneva.
- IOM. 2012. Lao PDR fact and figure. Retrieved 18 March 2014, from IOM <http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/asia-and-the-pacific/lao-pdr.html>
- Kelly P. 2011. Migration, agrarian transition, and rural change in Southeast Asia. *Critical Asian Studies* 43: 479–506.
- Keyes CF. 2012. 'Cosmopolitan' villagers and populist democracy in Thailand. *South East Asia Research* 20: 343–360.

- King R, Skeldon R, Vullnetari J. 2008. Internal and international migration: bridging the theoretical divide. Retrieved 15 June 2011, from Sussex Centre for Migration Research <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/migration/documents/mwp52.pdf>
- Latt SSW. 2009. Ethnic politics, migrant labour and agrarian transformation: a case study of the Hmong and Shan in a royal project in northern Thailand. ChATSEA Working Paper 4. Retrieved 15 June 2011 from http://catsea1.caac.umontreal.ca/ChATSEA/Globalmedia_new/ChATSEA-WP-4-Latt.pdf
- Makpun P. 2008. Voices from the Mekong: social networking and identity negotiation in the era of "regional development" in a Thai-Lao border community. Master Degree Thesis Chiang Mai University, Thailand.
- Maneemai T. 2012. Constructing community across borders Lao immigrant workers in Thailand. *European Journal of Social Sciences* 30: 637–645.
- Marcus GE. 1995. Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.
- Mills MB. 1997. Contesting the margins of modernity: women, migration, and consumption in Thailand. *American Ethnologist* 24: 37–61.
- Mills MB. 1999. *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force: Consuming Desires, Contested Selves*. Rutgers University Press: London.
- Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. 2011. Statistical Report of Irregular Migrants in Thailand 2011. Retrieved 12 January 2013 <http://wp.doe.go.th/sites/default/files/statistic/8/sy2554.pdf>
- Moerman M. 1968. *Agricultural Change and Peasant Choice in a Thai Village*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Poertner E, Junginger M, Mueller-Boeker U. 2011. Migration in far west Nepal. *Critical Asian Studies* 43: 23–47.
- Rigg J. 2001. *More Than the Soil, Rural Change in Southeast Asia*. Prentice Hall: Harlow, Essex.
- Rigg J. 2005. *Living with Transition in Laos: Market Integration in Southeast Asia*. Routledge: Oxon.
- Rigg J. 2007. Moving lives: migration and livelihood in the Lao PDR. *Population, Space and Place* 13: 163–178.
- Rigg J. 2013. From rural to urban: a geography of boundary crossing in Southeast Asia. *TRaNS: Trans Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 1: 5–26.
- Rigg J, Salamanca A. 2011. Connecting lives, living and locations. *Critical Asian Studies* 43(4): 551–575.
- Rigg J, Salamanca, A. 2012. Moving lives in northeast Thailand: households mobility transformation and the village, 1982–2009. In *Revisiting Rural Places: Pathways to Poverty and Prosperity in Southeast Asia*, Rigg J, Vandergeest P (eds). University of Hawaii Press: Hawaii; 88–111.
- Rungmanee S. 2014. Compromise margin: migration and agrarian transformation in the northeastern Thai-Lao borderlands. Ph.D. Thesis University of Sydney, Australia.
- Sharp L, Hanks L. 1978. *Bang Chan: Social History of Rural Community in Thailand*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca.
- Skeldon R. 2006. Interlinkages between internal and international migration and development in the Asian region. *Population, Space and Place* 12: 15–30.
- Skeldon R. 2012a. Migration transitions revisited: their continued relevance for the development of migration theory. *Population, Space and Place* 18: 154–166.
- Skeldon R. 2012b. Going round in circles: circular migration, poverty alleviation and marginality. *International Migration* 50: 43–60.
- Taotawin N. 2011. Politics of organic agriculture in the context of flexible accumulation and agricultural restructuring in northeastern Thailand, Ph.D. Thesis, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai.
- UNDP. 2010. Mobility and migration: a guidance note for human development report teams, Retrieved from http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/NHDR_Migration_GN.pdf
- Walker A. 2012. *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy*. University of Wisconsin Press: Wisconsin.
- World Bank. 2006a. *Global Economic Prospects: Economic Implications of Remittances and Migration*. World Bank: Washington D.C.
- World Bank. 2006b. Labour migration in the greater Mekong sub-region: synthesis report: phase I. Retrieved 20 May 2013, from World Bank http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTTHAILAND/Resources/333200-1089943634036/475256-1151398858396/LM_in_GMSs_Nov06.pdf
- World Bank. 2008. *World Development Report 2009: Reshaping Economic Geography*. World Bank: Washington D.C.