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Manipulating identity among Burmese muslim traders: A case study of Mae Sod cross border trade

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Abstract

In the context of modern nation-states, borderlands occupy a unique space as they are typically inhabited by groups with two different cultural or social identities. There are two important factors in the creation of heterogeneous identity in borderlands: geo-physical conditions and migration flows. In the case of borderlands, migration is not limited to the moving of people or goods but also includes how ideologies are embedded in one region and transplanted to another region. This process of ideological movement has been one of the main focuses for many prior borderland studies. Nonetheless, most analyses have concluded with examinations of how identity is restructured in relation to the creation of a group consciousness or feeling of togetherness. In contrast, this study aimed to answer two main questions. First, it inquired as to how migrants reconstructed their identities either in the individual or collective level. Second, it examined how they give meaning towards their reconstructed identities. To answer these questions, I conducted a case study of cross border trade in Mae Sod with a focus on individuals an ethnic migrant group, Burmese^b Muslim traders. Data presented in this study was gathered using participant observations of the Burmese Muslim community in Mae Sod as well as in-depth interviews with persons involved with cross border trade. In addition, I have also conducted archival research to help analyze the arguments of this study. The role of Burmese Muslims within cross-border trade in Mae Sod is classified as significant since it can be viewed in various scales, from small into big traders. In terms of identity reproduction, this study argues that Burmese Muslim traders defined identity not only as an effort to grow the feeling of togetherness or solidarity through the identification of “us” and “them”, but also as a strategy to maintain their survival in Mae Sod. Burmese Muslim traders viewed the identity of Islam as social capital, as their identity gives them access to a broad, inter-ethnic, cross-national network. However, Burmese Muslim traders connected though Muslim networks based not only on religious practice but also in their socio-economic practice. In this case, the Muslim network accommodates much information or knowledge related to cross border trade in Mae Sod for Burmese Muslim traders.

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^b The term of Burmese in this study is not only referred to one ethnic group in Myanmar, but also to the whole citizenship of Myanmar.

Keywords: Reproduction of identity; Mae Sod; Burmese muslim traders, muslim networks

1. Introduction

Borderland is located between two different sovereignties and it is chanced to be inhabited by the citizens with multiple identities. Before the modern nation state, peoples' movement between states could not be monitored and often occurred without governance. Each person or group would bring their identities from their old location to their new location. The emergence of modern nation-states, mapping technology, and national identities obstructed both the movement process and the reconstruction of identities. New rules, such as those governing passport and visa applications, caused movement across national borders to be more difficult and in many cases restricted segments of the population. Moreover, for those persons or groups who have successfully completed trans-national migration, building national identities in the host countries becomes a new problem which sometimes places them into marginalized groups.

In this way, identity is, therefore, contested, both in the borderlands and within nation states. While the nation state has become the dominant force in defining identities, there is still great variance in identity both within states and in borderlands. I may argue there will always raise an effort of contest and negotiation from people or group towards pressure of nation state. This is particularly true in the case of those who feel marginalized. On the other hand, some cooperation by nation states in response towards global flow has sometimes given space for the process of identity reconstruction. To examine this phenomenon, I used a case study of Mae Sod by focusing on two different levels of related analysis: macro and micro level. I used the macro level to answer two main questions, how do states deal with their borderlands in the globalized age? And how was the impact in context of borderland identities? On the micro level, this study examined questions including how an ethnic group reconstruct their identities and how they give meaning towards those identities.

This paper presents empirical data which I collected during a month visit to Mae Sod. The data were divided into two parts: interview results and participant observations. In order to strengthen some arguments in this paper, I have also done background research pertinent to the topic. This paper has three parts: 1) How political state-making caused Mae Sod into a region with a complex identities; 2) How the inhabitants, particularly ethnic minorities, reconstructed their identities in Mae Sod; and 3) How ethnic minorities give meaning to and manipulate their identities to survive despite economic, social, and political pressures.

2. Background of Analysis

Discussions of identity typically involve the concepts of race, gender, kinship and blood. These four concepts are the main patterns traditionally used for identifying those who belong to 'us' and those who belong to 'them'. As these concepts are typically immutable, they create an idea of identity as given, fixed, stable and unchanging. Conversely, constructivism views identity as something which is constructed, fluid and unstable [1-4]. In order to illustrate the constructivist approach to identity, scholars have investigated how nation states create homogeneous national identity [5] to grow the feeling of togetherness, national consciousness and loyalty for society [6]. Yet, national identity is sometimes considered unfair if it is constructed based on ethnic majority as happened in China [3], Singapore [7], or Malaysia [4]. It is not rare that conflicts emerge between state and marginalized ethnic minorities [8-9].

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