

From the protected zone to the unknown: Trajectories of Second Generation Shan Youth in Thai public schools and their strategies to overcome liminal legality¹

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Abstract

This article explores the everyday experiences of second generation Shan youth at Thai public schools in urban Chiang Mai and their life trajectories after completing middle school (grade 9). Drawing on data from ethnographic fieldwork, it is argued that school is more than a space of differentiation as often portrayed by the literature; it is also space for normalization, protection, inclusion and opportunities. This article also discusses how Shan youths in Chiang Mai put into use the various modes of citizenship they have learned in school to navigate their life outside this “protected zone”. By building an understanding of the day-to-day experiences of inclusions and exclusions of second generation Shan migrants, this article hopes to contribute to broadening discussions on migrant citizenship beyond the legal/illegal dichotomy and generate future dialogue on investigating the mechanisms that produce and sustain illegality.

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Introduction

As in many countries, Thai schools are among key formal institutions that shape and mold patriotism and citizenship. Since 2005, the Education for All Cabinet Resolution has been granting a right to education to all children regardless of their legal status, making public schools accessible to the “illegal others”. There are now approximately 130,000 migrant students in Thai public schools and the number is projected to rise quickly in the next a few years (Save the Children and World Education 2014).

The works of several scholars have highlighted the issues with policy implementation, including barriers of access due to practical issues and negative attitudes of schools, an inflexible curriculum, a high drop out rate after primary schools and incoherent policy directions from the government (Bupa 2011; Nongyao 2012; Kamonwan 2014). While important, these works do not offer sufficient insights into the dynamic process of identity negotiation experienced by both the schools and the immigrant students. Apart from Buadaeng’s work (2011) that gives an overview of the lives of second generation migrant children from Myanmar in five provinces, there is little ethnographic data about second generation migrant children’s identity construction and life trajectories after primary school.

This article shed sheds light on the everyday experiences of second generation Shan youth at Thai public schools in urban Chiang Mai and their life trajectories after completing middle school (grade 9). With one-sixth of Chiang Mai’s population being Shan (Amporn 2012), it is critical that their participation in various social spheres be examined. Recognizing school as a major arena where citizenship ideals are constantly being instructed and constructed, this article draws on early findings from an ethnographic fieldwork in Thai public schools to make three empirical contributions to current literature on migrant children in Thai public schools. First, it highlights the ways in which the schools themselves have adapted as a result of this important demographical change. Second, it portrays schools not only as one-sided powerful institutions, but unique protected space where the lines of formal and informal membership at times merge. Finally, it

discusses how Shan youth negotiate the dynamic process of belonging and put into use the various modes of citizenship they have learned in school to navigate their life outside this “protected zone”.

Methodologies and field site

From September 2015-February 2016, I conducted the first phase of my fieldwork for a PhD in cultural anthropology in urban areas of Chiang Mai, where a large number of Shan migrants have settled. Working as a part-time volunteer teacher in three urban public schools with high enrollment rates of Shan children, I was able to conduct participant observation in classrooms, as well as several of the school activities, including a parents-teacher conference, a school trip outside the province and other school festivities. Being involved in three different schools allowed me to gain various insights and observe the patterns in my findings. I also conducted bi-monthly focus-group interviews with four core-participants, who were all 14 years old and were friends with one another. I followed these core participants to various cityscapes and domains of life. In addition, I also conducted in-depth interviews with six other Shan youth aged 14-20 years old. All interviews were conducted in the Thai language.

Having made acquaintances with my core participants prior to becoming their teacher in school, I was considered by them as a “big sister” rather than a typical teacher. As a native of Chiang Mai, but having lived half of my life abroad, I have had my identity questioned by all of my participants. Their initial remarks to me often were: “Are you Thai? But where are you *really* from?” Interestingly, their perception about my identity is similar to how scholars tend to perceive migrant children – neither here nor there.

Chiang Mai’s history, growing urban economy and complex identity make it a fascinating field site to explore immigrant youth’s identity and citizenship formation. The relationship between this former capital of the Lanna Kingdom and the Shan people has been described to me by many of my wider participants as akin to “brother and sister”. Given the shared history, languages, religion and traditional cultures, Chiang Mai has long been a refuge to the Shan people in exile, and now home to the Shan migrants seeking employment

opportunities. At the same time, formal education and national identity instilled by Thai public schools have drawn a formal line of separation limiting this affinity. As a result, Chiang Mai's own identity reflects tensions between citizenship as a formal legal status and as belonging. While it could be argued that this close tie and high level of integration of the Shan migrants makes the city an "exception to the rule" and thus inapplicable to the rest of the country, their incorporation still offers interesting insights that citizenship is fluid and multifaceted, rather than being a static and singular concept as often portrayed by the state.

Early findings and discussions

Changing relationship between schools and migrant students

Historically and globally, school is one of the most powerful and established state institutions to push for assimilation and "unity of experiences and orientation" (Rumbaut 1997: 944; cited in Gonzales 2011: 604). Although the mainstream education offered in public school has been described by scholars as culturally hegemonic and inflexible to the needs of migrant students (Bupa 2011; Nongyao 2012, 2014; Kamonwan 2014), my early findings indicate that influence is not entirely one-sided. The presence of migrant children has, over time, shaped attitudes of schools and teachers and forced them to adapt. Three of my interviewees above the age of 18 all recounted that they felt excluded and were "harassed by the teachers" every day for a birth certificate that they did not have. They were mocked constantly as "Burmese" by their Thai peers. These negative experiences contrast quite heavily with the experiences of some public schools in Chiang Mai. Teachers whom I met also seem to have adjusted to the new reality. One teacher said: "Ten years ago, I had no idea what each number [in the ID] meant. I did not even know the difference between Shan and Burmese. Now I even learned a few words in the [Shan] language." The practice of annual home visits recently started by the government also allows teachers to understand migrant students and their familial conditions better. As a result of ASEAN Economic Community establishment, I also witnessed the push to embrace ASEAN identity in these schools, which means that Myanmar is not

portrayed only as an enemy in a history class, but also an ASEAN neighbor.

With many of the Thai parents opting to send their children to private or highly competitive public schools, immigrant children become the key “consumers” of small neighborhood schools, allowing them to continue to exist. In some schools, students now wear “ethnic costumes” instead of uniforms on Fridays. During school festivities, such as Children’s Day or New Year’s Eve, parents are invited to participate in school activities. They usually take on the role of cooking and showcasing their ethnic food. A reputation of being a model school that “integrates migrants” helps the school build its “social capital” and networks as it attracts interests and resources not only from prospective migrant parents, but also from NGOs, researchers, and even governmental agencies, whose work is related to migrant children.

Space of differentiation and normalization

As a primary socio-cultural environment for a young person, school is a major regime of power where culturally constituted personal goals and projects are internalized. It is also where one learns of one’s constraints, limitations and opportunities regarding realization of these goals. Thai public schools juxtapose space of differentiation and normalization, of exclusion and inclusion. On the one hand, school remains an essential and formal state instrument to instill citizenship habitus. A daily chanting of “12 values of being a good Thai child” is a prime example of a “correct” code of conduct officially imposed on young minds. On the other hand, school has become one of the few spaces where legal status does not matter since their status as students precedes their other identity and legality.

My most vocal and insightful participant was Aum³, a 14 years old, who does not exist in the legal system. Despite being born in Thailand, Aum does not have a birth certificate or any other document to recognize her personhood, except a school ID. Despite being “stateless” and “non-existent” in the world of legal documents, Aum very much exists in real life and thrives at school. I find Sassen’s(2002) framework of “unauthorized yet recognized subjects”

³ All of the participant’s names in this paper are pseudonyms.

pertinent in understanding experiences such as Aum. Sassen argues that undocumented immigrants can move between the multiple meanings of citizenship, and through engaging in the same routine daily practices with those of formally defined citizens, they enter an “informal social contract” with their communities, allowing them to be recognized despite their unauthorized status. Aum’s experience of “liminality” also echoes the recent shift in the literature on migrant citizenship and illegality. I concur with several scholars who argue for the need to move away from the legal/illegal dichotomy to understanding the day-to-day experiences of inclusions and exclusions of migrants and investigating the mechanisms that produce and sustain illegality (Ong 1999; De Genova 2002; Gonzales 2011). While it is not within the scope of this article, I join these scholars in calling for further research in this area.

For Aum, being a student means more than an opportunity to learn; such an identity provides her protection beyond the realm of school. Within the hierarchy of documents issued to immigrants, a school-issued ID card is regarded by many of my participants as the most powerful because: 1) it is harmless – somehow being a student equates to innocence; 2) it normalizes the identity and creates space for common experience – most Thais can identify with going to school and being a student; 3) it is issued by a recognized, respectable, neutral governmental institution. Being in a school also often means that children will get help obtaining a zero number card, which allows them to have access to healthcare and to be in the governmental registration system. For some parents, the decision to enroll their children is linked with accessing this document (Nongyao 2014).

Dutiful citizenship

While my informal conversations with most teachers reveal their belief that “all children are the same,” or “they are my students regardless of where they are from,” they also vocalized that immigrant children must be dutiful and respectful toward Thai people. On many occasions, teachers gave speeches to remind immigrant children to be grateful to the Thai state, the king and the people for extending

hospitality and letting them stay in the country. Having previously served at very poor rural schools, the teachers expressed their discontent to me several times regarding how migrant children in urban areas have easy access to education and receive significant financial support from the government, while many of their former rural “Thai”⁴ students had to go through physical and financial hardships to access education. Observing the children buying “unnecessary toys” during a school field trip, one teacher commented: “the hilltribe students I taught were much better behaved than these rich and spoilt migrant kids in the city.” An image of a good migrant child deserving of opportunity is a poor one. Their position of inferiority is required to justify the help and aid received, suggesting a “deservingness” frame often associated with humanitarian approach, rather than a human rights approach where one merits rights based on an equal footing (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2014).

In an attempt to demonstrate success in “educating” migrant children, the schools seem to focus on extra-curricular activities related to performing Thai culture. At all three schools, migrant children are often sent to compete in inter-school competitions, bringing fame and pride. One participant won the “Thai etiquette” competition at the national level. My other three participants recently appeared on television as “Thai cultural heritage ambassadors”.

Aesthetic citizenship: Looking Thai, Acting Thai

In my focus-group with three 14-year-old girls and one boy, the topic of looks came up many times. This group is not only very aware of the importance of looking Thai, they employ it regularly. The message “to look normal is to look Thai” was often emphasized to me. They often commented on who looks more Thai in the photos we took, or how “un-Shan” they look in general. Aum, for example, is aware that the safety and unquestioned privilege she is enjoying is owed to looking like a child, but not any child – a Thai child. When I asked if she worried about being caught for not having proper documents,

⁴ Hilltribe children with Thai citizenship and those with no citizenship, but who have been in Thailand for a long time.

Aum replied: “When I start to really look like a teenager, I might be questioned, but I look Thai enough, so I can pass. Plus, I speak Thai with no accent. So I think I will be fine.” Being able to speak central Thai fluently without an accent is seen as a valuable asset in impersonating the Thai look. With friends, Aum feels that she can be herself and can speak Thai with some words in Shan here and there. In the presence of a senior Thai person, she is conscious that she has to talk and behave “very Thai”. She does so by “putting on proper Thai and formal manners.” She told me “that’s when I really have to erase my Shanness and not to interject any Shan words.” Woon added: “If we [second generation Shan children] want to, we can ‘simulate’ the Thai manner in order to blend in. Like we just know how to adjust.”

Various trajectories to early adulthood and strategies to survive

As much as acting Thai can be almost as powerful as a legal document in certain circumstances, there are limits to these aesthetic and linguistic aspects of citizenship. Not having a formal Thai citizenship has obvious limiting consequences. Up until middle school, the daily experience of immigrant children can be essentially undifferentiated from those of other Thai children. Middle school is an important crossroad for many of my participants – they are now considered “old enough” to share the family’s financial burden and must decide which path to take for their future. The reality of their illegality also kicks in as it closes many doors in terms of job opportunities and scholarships. To capture the complex situation facing these youth, I turn to the work of Gonzales (2011) who studies the transition to adulthood among undocumented Latino young adults. He argues that although illegality has little direct impact on most aspects of childhood, it becomes “a defining feature of late adolescence and adulthood” as it prevents these youth from following normative pathways to adulthoods (2011, 605). According to Gonzales, family poverty and illegal status place undocumented youth in a “developmental limbo”. On the one hand, they are required to assume financial and other responsibilities beyond their age. On the other hand, they are not and cannot participate in many adult activities,

such as legally work, drive or vote, due to legal restrictions, leaving them unable to complete important transitions.

Among my participants, there are four paths that have been taken to navigate the new restrictions of life after middle school, all of which demand a shifting of identity one way or another. The first path is to drop out and join the workforce. The second path is to continue education at a vocational school, while being fully aware that the jobs they are being trained for are reserved only for Thai citizens. My participants in this track hope that by the time they graduate, the laws will have changed. Some also mentioned potentially applying for Burmese citizenship or participate in the American green card lottery. The third path involves continuing their education until high school and reevaluate. Those in this group are good students, who hope that being “dutiful” and exceptional students will somehow convert to higher chance of obtaining legal status. The fourth path is to drop out to work during the day and attend a Migrant Learning Centre (MLC) in the evenings to obtain the General Education Development (GED) diploma—an equivalence of a high school degree equivalence in an American system,⁵ then apply for Burmese citizenship and enroll as a foreign student at a Thai university.

Kwancheewan (2011) notes that familial networks and social capital play a crucial part when second generation migrants make a decision about the future. While the decision making process recounted by my participants reflects Kwancheewan’s findings, it appears that their academic performance and their connections exposed to them as students are also crucial in helping Shan youth determine their future trajectory. Some benefit from their reputation as good students to receive influential recommendation letters from teachers or financial assistance to continue their education from their parents’ Thai employers. Some take advantage of the connections gained through their extracurricular activities to help pave their ways.⁶ Connections

⁵ Interestingly, one MLC attended by a participant prepares migrant children for an online exam for an American High School Diploma as it provides better prospects for the future (source: an interview with the Founder).

⁶ The migrant students in these schools are often invited to attend roundtables or forums organized by NGOs on the issues of legality and statelessness.

with NGOs prove particularly helpful. For example, one received financial aid for a university degree through a Shan NGO based in Chiang Mai. Two others have sought legal advice from activist lawyers to apply for Thai citizenship.

When asked about their futures and whether the lack of citizenship frustrates them, the answers I often heard were: “If they are going to give [the legal status] to me, they will give it to me;” and: “We have to do our best. If we are highly competent, they are going to accept us. Thai people will have to change their attitude.” Their present-oriented mindset could be interpreted as their inability to be future-oriented owing to their developmental limbo. I am not sure what exactly it is that gives my participants such confidence in this belief, but I have come to see that their acceptance of the situation is not mere resignation, but either strategic preservation of energy or a form of normalization by Thai education. After all, a Thai proverb says: “do your best today,” implying that the rest will follow.

Conclusion

By exploring the changing nature of the relationship between public schools and second generation Shan youth students, this article argued that schools are not only a space of differentiation as often portrayed by the existing literature; they also represent, to an extent, space for normalization inclusion and opportunities. By building an understanding of the day-to day experiences of inclusions and exclusions of second generation Shan migrants and exploring how they use various modes of citizenship, networks and knowledge acquired in school to navigate their life choices and future trajectories, this article hopes to contribute to broadening discussions on migrant citizenship beyond the legal/illegal dichotomy and invite future dialogue on investigating the mechanisms that produce and sustain illegality.

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