



## The dynamics of the cross-border trades and the traders of Northwestern Thailand, 1950s to 2010s<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT**—This research examines the dynamics of cross-border trade and the lives of the traders in the northwest part of Thailand between the 1950s and 2010s, focusing on Mae Hong Son, a border province close to Burma. Since the 18th century, the ethnic Tai traders transported commodities by pack-saddle on trade routes cutting across northern Thailand, Shan state, and the south of Burma. Under the process of nation-building throughout the 20th century and especially the centralization of the economy, their trading activities eventually came to a halt. The article explores three main points. First, it highlights the impact of the economic reform of border trades on the trader's lived experiences through an exploration of the remaining traders' collective memories.<sup>2</sup> Second, memories of cross-border trade are interconnected with socio-cultural relations along the border between Thailand and Myanmar, and the research argues that memories of cultural ties and the historical turning point mentioned above are crucial for any understanding of cross-border trade in the modern era. Finally, the period under study coincides with what is commonly called the modernization era, which is often associated with free trade policies. The article highlights how cross-border trading in northwestern Thailand in this era became a bone of contention between local traders and new entrepreneurs. Local traders know well the natural routes with informal border stations while the new entrepreneurs have official support from both government and non-government agencies. This article contributes to an understanding of cross-border trade in a transnational context by supplementing economic history with social history.



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## Prologue

This article makes use of oral history and narratives collected from people living in the border regions. The approach of microhistory investigates small-scale shifts and dynamism to better understand large-scale and structural changes, with an emphasis on an emic view. Rather than making a claim to the truth, the historian aims to reconstruct a plausible interpretation of the past from the sources. As Waterson (2007, 3-6) explains, everyday life history is created out of multiple individual narratives that are fragmented and outside of linear time and conventional understanding. The value of these narratives, therefore, lies not in their objectiveness but in the fact of their being constructed between the narrator and the audience. Such valorization is part of the paradigm emerging from postcolonial studies, an example of which is subaltern studies, which challenge grand narratives and History by seeking out less powerful voices and narratives from the margin. For its methodology, this research deploys the concepts of microhistory and everyday life history, which are fields of history adapted from ethnology and anthropology.<sup>3</sup>

## Border studies and transnationalism

Anthropology is one of the main disciplines deeply invested in the study of borderlands but it could be said that the discipline is not concerned with constructing a new paradigm, only in focusing on the issue of socio-cultural boundaries. Barth (1969) argued that this kind of study, in fact, foregrounds cultural differences between the various ethnic groups that are of interest to the anthropologist and create divisions. The limits of this approach are the lack of interest in the politico-historical context which is crucial in determining and understanding the meaning of socio-cultural boundaries (Donnan and Wilson 2010, 2; Yos 2008, 52).

The growing trend of interdisciplinary studies since the 1970s included the study of ethnicities and identities that exist transnationally or beyond ideas of nationalism, as well as the inversion of importance between the center and periphery as the object of study. Thus the borderland became the locus for the investigation into and the historical preservation of lived experiences and collective memo-

ries that transcend these boundaries. The very meaning of borderland is therefore fluid, tied as it is to processes of negotiation with dominant political relations and context (Pinkaew 2006; Horstmann and Wadley 2006). A similar kind of study is that of the contact zone between such spaces, which enables us to understand a set of relationships and interactions defining borderland regions with a degree of independence from statist discourse and politics (Clifford 1997; Saldívar 1997, 13-14).

Not only is there growing interest in the borderland as a new paradigm but the very subjectivity of the anthropologist may be said to have changed. For example, in his own work Rosaldo (1989, 28-29) defines the notion of “borderland” in this way:

For social analysis, cultural borderlands have moved from a marginal to a central place. In certain cases, such borders are literal. Cities throughout the world today increasingly include minorities defined by race, ethnicity, language, class, religion and sexual orientation. Encounters with ‘difference’ now pervade modern everyday life in urban settings.... Borderlands surface not only at the boundaries of officially recognized cultural units, but also at the less formal intersection, such as those of gender, age, status, and distinctive life experiences.

Moreover, the borderland as a paradigm is implicated in other conceptual apparatuses such as the diaspora, cultural identity, transnationalism, and multiculturalism (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 33-38). Hannerz's (1996) study, “Flows, boundaries and hybrids: keywords in transnational anthropology,” deploys the paradigm of the borderland to understand cultural dimensions, similar to Lash and Urry (1994, 193, 252) who claim that the forces underlying the changes of modern society are capital, labor, commodity, information, and image, each of which operates not independently but under the capitalist structures of consumerism and advertising in the post-industrial context.

In the last two decades, borderland studies have come into their own. As Walker (1999) noted, rather than liberty and free trade, neoliberalism depends on myriad state regulations, rules and control of both people and commodities. Border spaces, however, are spaces

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where the state's control is more tenuous and where negotiations between local communities and the state frequently occur, which often redefine the very meaning of the borderland. One of the ways that new negotiations and meanings can emerge is through the construction of new collective memories and narratives and oral history. These voices from the border form part of the process of identity-construction and help determine the meaning of the borderland.

#### **The borderland: Mae Hong Son in historical context**

Mae Hong Son is a border town in the northwestern part of Thailand. In this research I have chosen to study three districts, the capital district of Mae Hong Son, the Khun Yuam district, and the Mae Sariang district, all three of which border on Burma. The capital or Mueang district of Mae Hong Son has long established communities and its geography encompasses both plains and plateaus, with a mountain range lying along its western border where the Pai River originates. Its population is often mobile, partly associated with the historical-political context of Burma. Many of these people originally moved to Mae Hong Son from Burma when the British army occupied Shan state in 1885. As Thas (2010, 28-31) has documented in his research, the dynamics of the people are tied to three determinants: the marginal status of the community relative to the state; their location between competing for state powers; and their embeddedness within a transnational trade network. As part of Lanna (a kingdom in the north of Thailand assimilated into Siam under Rama V), the strategically located and already settled community of Mae Hong Son was incorporated into Thailand by around 1871.

The anthropologist Tannenbaum (1997), who undertook numerous field trips to Mae Hong Son between 1979-1981 and 1984-1985, found that the population of the border town was highly mobile, with many having escaped from former masters. Their claims to settlement and land rights were tenuous as the claims involved complex relationships with state power. In the earlier decades, from a turning point in the 1950s, the state had begun to extend its power into the marginal border territory and had ordered the relocation of the people from the hills to the plains, even though arable land and irrigation systems in the plains were still underdeveloped. However, during the period of

Tannenbaum's fieldwork between 1979 and 1981, the system of land ownership was found to be firmly in place, and the government had a policy of favoring the manufacturing sector, building communication and transportation networks connecting villages and cities, and encouraging commercial agriculture. Communication systems linked urban centers and village communities, changing local agricultural products into commodities. At the same time, the state pursued policies aimed at fostering local tourism, especially cultural and nature tourism, which in the two decades following resulted in many transformations in Mae Hong Son, including the emergence of a hospitality business of hotels, guesthouses, and other temporary rentals.

The changes affecting the Mae Hong Son borderland thus include the arrival of Burmese migrants to labor in the informal sector, both in Mae Hong Son and in the urban areas of Chiang Mai, as well as the appearance of tourists and outsiders. The relationship with both of these groups was important to the construction of new ethnic identities, especially that of the Tai.<sup>4</sup>

### Cross-border trade and the traders in Northwestern Thailand

Tai is the name for a large ethnic group which has spread across inner mainland Southeast Asia. They maintained important trading roles especially in long distance trade across cities and states and continued in cross-border trade after the emergence of the nation-state. An essential aspect of this was caravan trading along routes that traversed the whole of northern Thailand, upper Burma, southwestern China, and parts of Laos and Vietnam. The traders carried goods on the backs of pack bullocks or pack horses from town to town. Many of these goods were everyday necessities such as rice, salt, and sesame oil. In the premodern feudal social structure, the traders could amass wealth by soliciting patronage from feudal lords and the nobility but also by building networks among merchants of different ethnic groups. They also maintained close ties within their ethnic group. Traveling and cultivating strong relations with different groups of people, the Tai spoke many languages and they were sensitive to cultural differences and adaptive to the multiple ways of lives of the various communities. Those that later settled in Mae Hong Son were able to adapt to local customs without much difficulty or violence. The reason they gave

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for settling there is that Mae Hong Son was a trade junction, with many trade routes cutting across and no obstacles posed by the state in crossing the border in the pre-modern context.

Mae Hong Son was the preferred destination for trade and settlement not only for the Tai people but other migrant groups as well. One was a Bengali population, many of whom travelled from Bangladesh over Burma before crossing into the Thai borderland region. An old Bengali Muslim trader I interviewed revealed that while his father was a Bengali, his mother was a Tai. He recalled stories of many such cultural mixings and assimilations and the importance of trading in the borderland. Extensive ethnic identities and religious networks were important for cross-border trade and mutual aids, and they continue to be crucial today as the old man demonstrated in his context. Through his second marriage with a Karen woman, he now has as many Karen customers as Tai ones. He speaks many languages. In the case of Mae Hong Son, Muslim traders are as prominent as Tai traders, especially in the timber trade, and they have also adapted well to Tai and other ethnic groups in the area.

Wichian (2014), a Muslim and former finance officer of a timber trading company in the year 1972, and currently a trader, authored the memoir, “Timber concession routes in the history of Mae Sariang,” which offers a glimpse into the broader historical context. Alongside the competition between Britain and France to extend their dominion over mainland Southeast Asia was their competitive search for a trade route to Southern China. Many surveyors and colonial officers sent by both countries wrote various memos and reports that later became invaluable sources of information (Waraporn 2013, 4). The Bombay Burma Trading Corporation was the first foreign company to receive a concession for timber trading in Mae Hong Son from 1910. The concession was later transferred to a Thai company and to the Thai government. The timber industry brought rapid economic growth, contributing to the expansion of the border town as people both from within and outside Mae Hong Son province traveled to the borderland region to work in logging. The timber industry built the first roads from the border town to nearby urban centers, altering the transport and communication systems well before any development policy by the state reached the area (Wichian 2014).

The timber trade has continued in the borderland region since

1977, with many companies receiving concessions and the timber being brought to Chiang Mai for processing. In 1987, a few companies received concessions in Burma and discovered that there were several ethnic armies stationed along the border just within Burma. These groups benefited from the timber trade even as the fighting raged on. By 1996 the violence along the border began to have a more significant impact on the timber trade and most of the companies moved to Mae Sariang. Many also began smuggling logs from Thailand into Burma before transporting them back to Thailand as Burmese timber. With greater regulation, many of these companies were shut down and, as the timber industry declined, the profits amassed came to be invested in other businesses such as restaurants, hotels, and guesthouses, which continue their operations to this day.

The war along the border between 1986 and 1996 brought a large number of immigrants to Thailand. Many refugee camps were set up, for example, Ban Mai Nai Soi camp only 30 kilometers from Mueang District. Ban Mai Nai Soi was one of the first camps set up, its inhabitants being mostly Tai and Karen<sup>5</sup> with a smattering of other ethnic groups. Members of the community have many stories of illegal cross-border trading as well as tales of assimilation and cultural adaptation between the various peoples from both sides of the border. In 1994, Ban Mai Nai Soi was officially approved as a temporary shelter area, which facilitated the flow of goods and trading. By 1996, however, when the war became more violent, the border was closed but an increasing number of Karen people escaped the violence to the camps in Thailand. Despite the closing of the border the economy boomed with the increased number of settlers vitalizing local businesses and increasing the demand for goods from neighboring villages. While there was increased border security, including checkpoints for vehicles and people, and increased scrutiny over identification documents, the refugees and villagers continued to travel back and forth through lesser-known border-crossings. At the socio-cultural level, relationships between the refugees and local villages were cemented through marriage, religious networks, and a patronage system, enabling many to move from the camp into the local community. There emerged various channels for news specific to each ethnic group and their kinship networks, for example, the Karen News channel for the refugees. Such networks allowed not only the transfer of informa-

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tion but the preservation of linguistic and cultural contact between kinfolk on both sides of the border.

The changes and movements in the borderland have had a significant implication for the process of nation-building both in Thailand and Burma, giving rise to the many rules and regulations invented and imposed by the state to control the area, without any real effectiveness in practice. Despite the state's attempt at exerting absolute control, both people and goods continued to flow through the border in a kind of community and an economy beyond the grasp of the state.

#### **Mae Sariang: trade junction from past to present**

The population of Mae Sariang is composed of several ethnic groups such as Karen, Tai, Lawa, and Bengali. These have close socio-cultural relationships among one another as well as with kinfolk in other places. Many of the Karen people in Mae Sariang moved from Jom Thong and Mae Jam in Chiang Mai over three earlier generations. The Tai in Mae Sariang came from Chiang Tung and Burma and saw themselves as different from the Tai in the capital or Mueang district of Mae Hong Son. The Lawa are natives who had settled in the area for the longest time, and the Bengalis came from Bangladesh. A villager of Mae Sariang indicated that the Tai in the area spoke Burmese well and maintained a trade network with the Tai in Burma, especially in the Salween River basin. The trade route extends from the Yuam River to the Salween River on to Tavoy (Dawei), the Gulf of Martaban and then to Moulmein (Mawlamyine) in Burma. In former times the villagers felt more connected to the markets of Moulmein than to Chiang Mai and commodities from there were considered more modern, including things like cosmetics, combs, mirrors, dried food, shrimp paste, and fish sauce. With the closer ties with international trade, the people in the border region can speak English well, in part because of their interaction with the many visiting foreigners during the colonial period, such as colonial officers, merchants, pioneers, and even anthropologists. Many local people worked with foreigners as translators and guides, maintaining a relationship with the outside world that was more modern, international, and diverse before later coming to be labelled by the Thai state as marginal and backward or undeveloped border dwellers (Wichian 2014).

The old Mae Sariang city, which lies along the Yuam River and is locally known as Pok Tai,<sup>6</sup> is the home of many Tai communities. Pok Tai is also a well-known trade junction. In former times the caravan traders would stop there and the traders from Mae Sariang would take everyday consumer goods like rice and salt to the more remote communities in the hills. In 1987 Mae Sariang became a new economic area as a result of the timber trade and government policy to “change battlefields into trading zones,” meaning to open up spaces resistant to government control in the hills to development projects and transportation networks. Mae Sariang became connected with Chiang Mai and Bangkok through roadways constructed along the western border as a large number of refugees began moving to the border town to work in logging and transport. The increasing demand for consumer goods at the various forest stations encouraged the development of dried goods delivery services from Mae Sariang, which became a highly lucrative if somewhat unstable and risky business for many. Driving to the forest station two times per week could bring in as much as 8,000 Thai baht since the return journey often included transportation of smuggled goods or drugs. The logging industry also benefited many ethnic groups in the border region, who provided security for the smuggling of timber across the border. Being a trade junction, Mae Sariang had a diverse and hybrid population, and this hybridity was relevant to the way the Tai communities of the Pok Tai area construct their identities (Wichian 2014).

In the present day, with the government encouraging local tourism, Tai culture has been reified and commodified for tourist consumption. From their handicrafts to the festival celebrating the end of Buddhist lent, their culture has been scaled up into a spectacle and a tourist attraction and advertised through various channels. This form of celebration of the Tai culture is also connected with local politics and the competition for power amongst the various Tai leaders for positions in the local offices. The reification of Tai culture thus has political, cultural, and economic importance.

The findings of this research suggest that the generations following those of the caravan traders tended to become government officials rather than traders like their parents, that is, until the era of cultural and natural tourism outlined above, when a number of them chose to retire in order to return to the business world as pioneers in the local

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hospitality enterprises such as hotels, guesthouses, and the homestay and souvenir businesses. These new businessmen were heirs to the old businessmen and landlords of Pok Tai who had benefited from the great flood of 1984. The flood vastly changed the course of the Yuam River, bringing it closer to the main road of Pok Tai, substantially increasing the value of the surrounding land which today forms the site of riverfront hotels and restaurants and is a hotspot for tourism.

Border trade in Mae Sariang today depends mainly on the labor force from the Arakan (an ethnic group from the Rakhine state in the west of Burma), Tai (from Chiang Thung in Burma), and Uyghur ethnic communities. The Uyghur came from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and traveled via Sip Song Pan Na and Burma into Thailand. Within the existing, extensive cross-border network of kinship, many in these communities are involved in the illegal business of human smuggling and have chosen Mae Sariang as their base. The illegal migrants face many hardships and are often exploited by their employers. Mae Sariang is well-known amongst human rights groups as a site for smuggling in illegal migrants. Many Mae Sariang locals recount frequently encountering Uyghurs and Arakans in the forest areas bordering Mae Sariang, Chiang Mai, and Tak.

In sum, Mae Sariang has developed from a trade junction into an economic zone and center for nature and cultural tourism. Once a destination for caravan traders, it continues to attract myriad forms of travelers, laborers, and tourists to the present day.

### **Khun Yuam: On memories and historical records**

Khun Yuam is a small and peaceful town located on the upper Yuam River. The majority of the population are Tai and Karen people. The town can be understood through three significant periods of changes. The first or settlement era runs to 1957, when Khun Yuan was populated first and primarily by the Karen and the Tai, and then from about 1852 by people from Mok Mai, Mae Jak, and Nam Mang in Burma (Nushnaphang 2012, 121-23). The first settlers were the Karen who settled along the river (Thas 2010, 1). Both the Karen and the Tai retain memories of clearing the land for settlement, agriculture, and logging, as well as memories of caravan trading from town to town, such as from Khun Yuam to Mae Sariang and Chiang Mai.

Some recall World War Two and trading by floating rafts downstream to Mae Sariang from Tor Pae village.

In the past, Tor Pae village was permeated with bamboo groves, the villagers cut them to build the rafts. These rafts had second floors and had the stalls for keeping some rice, and they had a roof on the top. (Tor Pae villager, July 30 - August 2, 2015)

Around the same time, Bengali traders began to arrive along the border to peddle their wares. The Tai traders and Bengali peddlers benefited from the Japanese military's demand for fresh food. They bartered food for items such as woolen blankets and car tires. It could be said of Mae Hong Son that only in Khun Yuam can there be found good memories of the Japanese occupation. In fact, there are many memorials to Japanese troops at Khun Yuam to this day.

My father can speak several languages whole Tai, Bengali, Thai, English and Japanese. He did commerce with the Japanese military in World War Two and this benefited all. Baba (my father) imported the commodities from Chiang Mai; they were carried on elephants. Almost all were clothes. The commodities of Japanese troops were woolen blankets, clothes, and car tires. The military brought them to barter for local food. (Bengali trader at Khun Yuam, July 30 - August 2, 2015)

Numerous records at the National Archives of Thailand refer to Khun Yuam, Mae Sariang, and Mae Hong Son during the period of dispute between Siam (Thailand) and the British over the western border of Siam. The British-Siamese Treaty of 1895 laid down various regulations regarding the border region and its population, with Siam claiming anyone born or living in Mae Hong Son as a Siamese subject, thus including those born in Burma who had moved to Siam before 1895. The conflict arising over this designation revolved around the new importance placed on identification documents that could be used to prove people's nationality. While in cases of lack of identification papers Siam would not allow anyone to be tried in court as a foreigner under extraterritorial rights, claiming they must be tried as Siamese subjects, Siam also prohibited foreigners or those lacking iden-

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tification papers from owning or using land whether for constructing housing or for agriculture (TNA 1889-91, 8; TNA 1902-11, 8). It was this that pushed many foreign subjects and subordinates attached to foreign companies to file for the status of a Siamese subject. As the borderland became an area of contested sovereignty, both governments began sending troops to the border. The troops, however, often sided with and benefited from acting in the interests of local powerful figures (often traders) rather than in the interests of the nation. In an unusual court case, Siamese troops were found to have murdered and confiscated the property of some British subjects under the orders of the Khun Yuam governor, who had accused the British subjects of engaging in criminal activities. The British claimed they were merely traders from across the border. In the era before 1957, marked by new settlement, and the transformations and conflicts brought on by the rise of Siam as a nation state, all the way through to World War Two, cross-border movements of both people and goods remained the major characteristic of Khun Yuam.

The second period from 1957 to 1987 coincided with the period when National Economic Development Plans began to have a broader impact and to be implemented in the border regions. Within this period the government accelerated its project for extending infrastructure and public services to remote borderland areas. Roads from urban centers to these once remote places brought drastic changes to the people's way of life by altering patterns of production, consumption, land use, and communication. By 1964, agribusiness had taken hold in Khun Yuam, with commercial crops such as soybean and garlic, commissioned to be grown by various agricultural companies, thus beginning an era of patronage based on contract farming. Caravan trading was on the wane around the same time, though the traders still transported some local commodities, such as *miang* (tea leaves for chewing), popular in the local markets, as long as modern roads and vehicles were still limited and only usable depending on the seasons. Eventually, these traders were superseded by the new transportation technology and trade networks that linked the town to urban markets, which turned consumption preferences away from local products. The later generations of these caravan traders turned to new businesses, many becoming shopkeepers and some opening mini-theatres and hotels.



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My grandfather was a caravan trader, and he had elephants, horses and bullocks. The elephants helped drag the timber from the forest. The horses and bullocks transported the commodities. The next generation was that of my father. He went to Chiang Mai to study at The Prince Royal's College but World War Two started before he had finished. At last, my father became a policeman and still inherited our family business. I was an officer before I resigned and then a shopkeeper. (Shopkeeper at Khun Yuam, January 23, 2015)

As the result of the National Economic Development Plans these people were absorbed into the education system and almost entirely became officials in the expanding government bureaucracy, with some turning to private business. The turn to business characterizes the third period, with government officials retiring from their jobs early to take advantage of the growing trend in cultural and nature tourism in the area by opening hospitality-related businesses.

In the last period from 1987 to the present, the economy of the borderland was firmly connected to the tourism industry. Khun Yuam became a vital tourist attraction, boasting historical significance with its World War Two memorials and the Thailand-Japan museum, showcasing its cultural richness through homestay programs, the ethnic community of Ban Mae U-Kho, a village promoted for tourism, and festive Tai religious celebrations, among other tourist attractions. But while Khun Yuam comprises a large Tai population, Tai festivals are organized in Mae Hong Son and Mae Sariang, bigger towns which the local government calculates can accommodate more tourists. Nevertheless, Khun Yuam's importance cannot be denied, whether seen through its historical context, government archival records or the memory and narratives of its own inhabitants, which this research has tried to piece together for a better insight into the lives, movements, and transformations of the Tai caravan traders after their heyday.

### **Mae Hong Son: Destination of the travellers**

Many of the interviewees reported that their ancestors had moved to Mae Hong Son from elsewhere and these interviewees were of different ethnic groups. Among the informants of Thas (2010, 34), who interviewed many local people, a 76-year old woman said that

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her father was a Pakistani while her mother was a Tai from Pai. Her parents moved to Mae Hong Son because it was a trade junction and a significant market. Her family trading business relied on a network of Pakistanis trading in both Burma and Chiang Mai. The goods they commonly traded in Mae Hong Son were necessities, medicinal herbs, soap, gold, and silver. Another interviewee, a 98-year old man and former caravan trader, said he used to transport such goods as dried chili, garlic, and sesame oil from Mae Hong Son to Burma and on the return journey would bring products in high demand such as soap, canned fish, dried shrimp, medicine, clothes, and sweetened condensed milk back to Mae Hong Son. Consumption was significant as a marker of social status; a wealthy person would purchase and use galvanized iron for his roof while ordinary people used straw and this extended to the different abilities of the different classes to store or hoard provisions as well.

Mae Hong Son is located in the northwestern part of Thailand and has a long history of migration and settlement. During the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885, a large number of people fled the war to Mhok Mai and Muang Mai (parts of Burma that currently have large Tai populations) and Mae Hong Son. Official Siamese documents from the period reveal the difficulties of cross-border traveling for both Siamese and British subjects. While the colonial government was later able to bring all of Burma under its control, rebellion and conflict in the border region continued until World War Two, when, between 1939 and 1945, the Japanese used the western border of Thailand to move its troops in a maneuver to topple the strongholds of Western colonial power in Southeast Asia. The Thai government in this period sent troops into the hills to aid the Japanese, for example to Chiang Tung, and many of these soldiers stayed on when the war ended. When the Burmese military took power in 1962, they waged a violent campaign to eliminate all rival power groups in the border areas, disrupting trade and driving all cross-border activities underground into illegal smuggling, turning a vast number of ethnic minorities living along the border into refugees and smugglers of illegal migrants crossing into Thailand. Eventually refugee camps were set up in Mae Hong Son to accommodate the refugees.

These changes affected cross-border trade in Mae Hong Son. Whereas before most of the trading that occurred along the western

border was linked to markets in Moulmein in Burma, with the borders closed these were now diverted to Bangkok or Chiang Mai. The heyday of cross-border trading remained alive in the memories of the people on the border, however, and stories of those days have been passed down the generations. For these people, modernity came to them from Burma and not Thailand, in the form of still fondly remembered luxury clothing items and suits, chocolate, and mirrors.

My father went to Moulmein for trade. I recognized that he used the Burmese language well. From Mae Sariang to Moulmein is not far, so all commodities such as zinc and overcoats were transported from Burma. Almost all Mae Sariang people wore overcoats because they were cheap. (Mae Sariang informant, February 6, 2016)

Mae Hong Son is the provincial bureaucratic center and the site for many pioneering development projects. Along with transportation infrastructure the government built many public facilities such as an airport, hospitals, and schools. The Tai scholar and director of the Tai Yai Center in Mae Hong Son recounted from his family history that his father was one of the first to own and operate a rice mill in Pang Moo village, the largest community of pack-saddle caravan traders in Mae Hong Son. When he graduated from teacher's college in 1973, he received a Kawasaki motorcycle as a prize and was the first to own a motorcycle in his village. He noted that by the decade of the 1970s the pack-saddle caravan trade was in decline as motor vehicles had arrived in the area.

When I was a child I was interested in the way someone was saying that the caravan traders were coming. The children ran in a crowd to see the slugs inside the bullock's nose and were more excited when the slugs were pulled out. (Tai scholar and director of the Tai Yai Center in Mae Hong Son, February 8, 2016)

The villagers began to use bullock carts instead of pack-saddles. With the new emphasis on commercial agriculture and the conversion of increasing acreages of pasture and forest lands into land for growing crops, bullock carts became vital in carrying greater quantities of goods and could make use of the new roadways that had been

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constructed. But with more and more land being turned over for agriculture, soon there was not enough pasture and many conflicts arose in the area around the issue of bullocks destroying crops. Eventually, wealthy farmers were able to switch to the use of motorized pushcarts, which were popular before trucks became widely available. The meaning of physical space changed as well. Whereas the term “road” once designated the routes of caravan traders with specialized knowledge of the terrain, it now came to mean government property regulated by state rules and regulations and specially designated for vehicles. Pack animals or animal-pulled carts were often forbidden on the road to prevent their excrement tarnishing its cleanliness.

In their twilight years, the caravan traders of Pang Moo, Mae Hong Son roamed in search of *miang*, the favorite local chewing tea leaf. Their journey took them from Mae Hong Son first to Huay Pha, then along to Huay San Nok before arriving at Doy Tham Ma Kaeng, and later at Pang Ma Khue. These last were the sites of many stories about tigers and strange adventures. The places were *miang* could be found were from Mae La Na on to Mae Hung and Pang Ma Pha, where *miang* was most abundant. The traders would then bring the *miang* to Mae Rim, Chiang Mai, to trade for other commodities that they would transport back to sell in Mae Hong Son. Mae Hong Son, as the preferred destination for settlement, derived its allure from being a thriving market town connected to many other markets like Khun Yuam, Mae Sariang, and Chiang Mai, as well as other markets in the southern part of Burma.

An overarching view of Mae Hong Son reveals economic diversity. Mae Hong Son is a provincial center for government administration and the site of pioneering infrastructure and market development projects by the state. Between 1980 and 1990, when the Thai government encouraged tourism and extended infrastructure projects to the border towns and rural areas, Mae Hong Son took the opportunity to develop its cultural tourism, promoting Tai culture and its annual festival through various channels, including by establishing a Tai Yai center. More recently Mae Hong Son has become an essential stop in the emerging motorcycle tourism route, inviting tourists on high-powered “big bikes” to pass through the town on their way to Khun Yuam and Mae Sariang. The route through the valley is scenic, passing through local villages and sites of natural beauty, making Mae Hong

Son an important part of nature tourism and stimulating the local economy, which has grown to encompass hospitality businesses, coffee shops, travel agencies, as well as border trade.

### **Border trade in Northwestern Thailand**

Border zone trading and cross-border trading in the northwestern part of Thailand are of course not a recent phenomenon. What is recent is the turn to local history as well as an increasing interest within the field of history to look beyond the nation-state and at Southeast Asia as more interconnected, enabling localities at and straddling national borders to emerge into essential sites of study. In using microhistory and everyday life history as conceptual lenses, this article has tried to expand the boundary of historical understanding beyond national parameters. The research relies on primary source materials of local people's memories and stories, both oral and documented, alongside material artifacts found in the communities. Secondary sources include earlier research and academic works from various disciplines such as history, anthropology, archaeology, and microeconomics, including direct participant-observation in these communities by the researcher.

The findings of the research indicate that border trade in northwestern Thailand once existed somewhat independently from the economy of northern Thailand as a whole. A town on the margin of the modern Thai state, Mae Hong Son, played a central role as a market connecting many other markets across national boundaries, a characteristic common to many border towns. Mae Hong Son, therefore, has a prominent place in history, especially concerning the construction of Thai national history. Moreover, through new research into local histories the voices of local people are emerging to the fore and finding their place in larger historical narratives. These processes are also implicated in the construction of identity. For example, the stories told by caravan traders about the importance of their role in the past reveal a sense of self-worth and pride, which remain powerful to this day despite the loss of their leading economic status. These memories and their sense of pride also serve as an anchor for a future that they see as unpredictable and beyond their control.

The most common memory of both the Mueang and Khun Yuam district remains that of the days of pack-saddle trading, with the addi-



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tion of that of World War Two and the positive memories of the Japanese's contribution to an economic boom in Khun Yuam. Mae Sariang, on the other hand, has a different set of memories tied more to timber trade, which propelled the growth of its economy and population.

My ancestor came from Bangladesh; we have always been Muslim. Most Muslim people embarked to Burma because their homeland was hostile. When the Muslims arrived in Burma, they extended on to Moulmein, Rangoon, and the Karen State, such as Hpa-an and Hpa-pun. Almost all married with the local people and settled there. In the timber trade era before World War Two began, both Mae Sariang and Hpa-pun imported consumer products, steel, cement, and construction equipment and exported agricultural products to Burma. (Muslim trader at Mae Sariang, July 31, 2015)



The Bombay Burma was the leading company that received logging concessions in Thailand's northwestern areas, Burma and India, which resulted in many Bengalis migrating for better economic opportunities along the timber trading route. A Bengali interviewee told of his ancestors peddling wares along the route from India to southern Burma and into Mae Hong Son, selling textiles and other goods using the existing network of Bengali traders. Their roles and stories have not appeared as part of the national history of Thailand.

All border trades were implicated in changes occurring in neighboring countries. Trading along the border of northwestern Thailand was often impacted by the political situation in Burma, which affected the number of refugees, migrants, laborers, border checkpoints, the economy of the borderland and the livelihoods of the people. From the point of view of the local people, in the period when the borders were officially closed while the demand for goods remained high or became even higher on account of the increased influx of refugees, migrants and laborers, many local people took on the risky but lucrative business of moving goods across the border, an operation for which a reliable network, trust and experience were all indispensable. But when the border was officially open for trade, the government and big, outsider companies and entrepreneurs that benefited and no longer needed to rely on the cultivated networks, knowledge, and experience of local people as their intermediaries.



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In general, the dynamics of cross-border trade and the traders in northwestern Thailand between the 1950s and 2010s provide a perspective on the modern economy of the Thai state and its relationship to economic and political changes within Burma. It also allows a glimpse into the underside of the nation's project of the centralization of power. Changes in the border regions are thus not straightforward but interconnected with changing ethnic relationships and networks. Through memories, with all their limitations, people construct and maintain a meaningful sense of identity. This research has shown the border dwellers to be dynamic economic actors; in former times in control of border trade through caravan trading and small-scale peddling and in the present day adapted to the role of local entrepreneurs. They face many obstacles and are continually adapting and finding ways to secure their economic interests under new state-imposed regulations and conditions.

In the case of Mae Hong Son, the generation following the caravan traders came of age in the context of state-sponsored border trading and tourism and had to adapt to remain competitive under the new conditions. For example, border trading relies on trade networks as well as religious ones, and these are overlaid with networks of kinship and ethnicity.

I finished the Bachelor of Science Program in Information Technology at Ramkhamhaeng University, and now I have been freelance in Bangkok and have had my own business at Mae Sariang. My friends have done the same. Some have opened coffee shops, been shopkeepers, done homestay and other things. I did not want to match with my friends, so I searched for something else and have opted for hydroponics at last because of the new trend of healthy eating. (Local entrepreneur at Mae Sariang, July 2, 2015)

An interviewee indicated that the reason he had become a local entrepreneur was that he saw opportunities for economic growth in the expansion of the middle class, whose way of life is markedly different from that of the previous generations. The interviewee sees himself as part of this growing middle class, as distinct from the generations before, and is concerned with education, social networks, as well as the use of information technology to reduce or manage risks and advance economic opportunities.

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### *Endnotes*

1 This article is partly drawn from Waraporn Ruangsri's project research under the Thailand Research Fund entitled "The Mobility of Caravan Trader Communities in Mae Hong Son, 1950s-2010s" (2015).

2 Collective memories are the process in the reminding of past events which is essential for the narrator. On the other hand, narrating their past through their minds as though the narrator is drawing the social-portraits from revising their experiences and life at the present moment (Tonkin, 1992) These are the processes on conversation and dialogue between the narrator and the researcher.

3 Especially interpretative anthropology, for example, Geertz (1973), who argues for the study of human behavior through concept or theory, present the idea of "thick description" as a search for discourses or signs which could contribute to the understanding of the underlying social structure.

4 Most Tai people come from the Western Salween river and Shan state.

5 Ban Mai Nai Soi community is very close to the Loi Kaw town of Karen state, approximately the distance of one day by car.

6 Pok means the area or location with a certain characteristic, for example, Pok Tai has remarkable Tai cultural identities.

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