

Compromised Margins: Rethinking Power, State and Village Relations in the Borderlands of Thailand and Lao PDR¹

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Abstract

This article, which provides a new approach to exploring the relationship between state power and borderland communities in Northeast Thailand and Laos, argues that the state law and regulations governing the cross-border migration of agricultural workers from Laos to Thailand has been re-negotiated by local officials and villagers from both sides of the borderlands. This article suggests that the spatial characteristics of Northeast Thailand and the Lao borderlands, including their similarities of historical ties, languages, cultures, and geographical proximity, are conducive to re-negotiation of cross-border policies by state authorities and villagers. Case studies of cross-border employment and everyday life in Northeast Thailand and Lao borderlands portray a compromised form of engagement between the state and villagers.

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Introduction

On the morning of a raining day in July 2010, trails of Lao people step ashore from long-tail boats tied up at the boat port of Ban Fangthai,³ Wan Yai District, Mukdahan Province. They have come from several villages located along the Mekong River and the hinterland of Laos. At that time, I had expected to see movement across the Mekong River only during the operation hours of the local checkpoint, between 6.00 am and 6.00 pm. However, I found that I was mistaken regarding the practices and regulations at the Thai border: the checkpoint only formally operated on Tuesday afternoons and Sunday mornings. There was no one in charge of surveillance of the border during the peak cultivating season as most of villagers were working in their paddy fields. The Lao workers travelling from the other side of the Mekong River could reach the local checkpoint in Ban Fangthai any time through connection with friends or relatives. Since many of the workers had come from remote villages in the Lao hinterland, they could not return to their homes in the evening. The Thai farmers allowed the Lao workers to stay overnight in their homes or in small huts in the paddy fields. What appeared contradictory was that people, who were state agents, such as the village head and district government officials, also employed and allowed the Lao workers to stay overnight illegally. Other district and provincial government officials I had interviewed were aware of what was going on, but they said they were flexible – simply turning a blind eye – in order to ensure the collaboration of borderland residents. Such was the context when I commenced my fieldwork that led to my initial perceptions of the strict control and regulation enforcement in the border area.

Prompted by these observations, this article attempts to rethink the patterns of the relationships between the state authorities, state representatives and the villagers in Northeast Thailand and Lao border areas. Contrary to previous studies on the antagonistic relationships between state and villagers in the borderlands, this article argues that the spatial characteristics of Northeast Thailand and the Lao borderlands, including the situation of agricultural labour shortages in

³ Ban Fangthai is a fictitious name of my research site that literally means a village located on the Thai side of the river.

Thailand, the wage difference between to the two countries, and many similarities vis-a-vis historical ties, language, culture, and geographical proximity, support the efforts of local officials and villagers from both sides of the borderlands to re-negotiate cross-border policies for the mutual benefit of all.

This article, which undertakes an in-depth analysis of the livelihoods of people living in the borderland areas of Northeast Thailand and Laos and the interaction between state authorities and villagers, draws together concepts of state power, state-village relations and borderlands. The first section discusses the majority approaches utilized in state-village relations in the borderlands. In an attempt to examine the intersection of concepts and local realities, this article questions how cross-border practices in the borderlands, in particular the employment of Lao workers by Thai farmers, are continued even though they do not comply with Thailand's laws and regulations. Finally, this article draws on particular forms of compromise between the state authorities and the Thai-Lao villagers. This links to my research into the nature of state power, and the bridging and duplicitous position of the local government officials and the local people, that underpins the compromised patterns of relationships between the state and the border communities.

The relevant data here is based on fieldwork I conducted in Northeast Thailand and Laos in 2010 and 2011 that involved both in-depth interviews and informal discussions with villagers and local, district and provincial government officials in both countries. My research sites were initially two villages divided by the Mekong River: Ban Fangthai, Wan Yai district, approximately 25 kilometers from Mukdahan Province, Thailand and Ban Kaemkong,⁴ Xaibouri District, approximately 30 kilometers from Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR. I first sought to determine how migrant workers from Ban Kaemkong crossed the river through the locally operated checkpoint to undertake their agricultural daily work in Ban Fangthai and nearby areas. My intention was to investigate the agrarian relations in the Thai-Lao villages located opposite

⁴ Ban Kaemkong is a fictitious name that literally means a village nearby the Mekong River.

each other on the Mekong River bank. However, I found that only seven out of the 101 Lao migrant workers I met during fieldwork were from Ban Kaemkong; while the remainder were from other villages in the Lao hinterland. Out of this group, the 31 people from Ban Laonua,⁵ Xeno District, Savannakhet Province, approximately 50 kilometers from the river border, constituted the largest migration group from a specific location. This prompted my research and ultimately my decision to include this village as my research site. My experience in the Lao hinterland ultimately helped me to understand the nature of the social networks that extend beyond the borderlands and the ability of hinterland people to engage in livelihoods involving cross-border migration. Local level studies illustrate how state agents and villagers, with whom I conducted interviews and participatory observation, compromise state regulations and exploit the border location for mutual benefit.

State-Village Relations in Borderland Studies

The analyses of borders and borderlands in mainland Southeast Asia are dominated by two different approaches that exemplify the relationships between state and society: (1) a state-centric approach and (2) a state-society approach.

As noted by Andrew Walker, the state-centric approach, which focuses on the unequal, hierarchical and exploitative relations between the state centre and other parts of society, has been prominent in analyses of social formation in Southeast Asia and in discussion surrounding the relationships between the state centre and its peripheries.⁶ In this approach, borderlands are seen as backward regions, economic backwaters peripheral to the nation-state in whose territory they lie. Thongchai Winichakul's study of Siam's nationhood building in the nineteenth century demonstrates the powerlessness of borderlands and how they were generously given away for the sake of friendship between Siam and the colonial countries.⁷ In the process,

⁵ Ban Laonua is a fictitious name that literally means a village located in the northern direction.

⁶ Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat*.

⁷ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*.

many marginal areas were totally subsumed under the Siam's modern administration, reinforcing its nationhood and geography discourse and replacing the indigenous discourse with geographical technology, especially the mapping process.

In addition to the historical accounts, the state-centric approach has also influenced many analyses of the nature of state power and the various ways in which it has penetrated to its frontier, peripheries and rural areas through methods including administrative control,⁸ development projects,⁹ cultural domination¹⁰ and economic penetration.¹¹ These methods underlie the unequal, hierarchical and exploitative relations that persist between the state centre and powerless peripheries and how powerful state authorities penetrate and establish control over the nation's peripheral zones and their residents.

In contrast, the state-society approach challenges the state-centric approach with its overemphasis on state power. This approach presupposes a heterogeneous form of social life and the struggles in society between state and other social units such as clans and tribes. It has led to inherent assumptions regarding the conflict forms of state-society relations¹² and subaltern studies.¹³ In studies of the borderlands, the state-society approach is also exemplified in discussions of the domination of the state-centre over the borderland residents and of the ways in which people have to struggle, negotiate, oppose and resist to maintain their ways of life.¹⁴

Apropos of the state-society approach, I initially refer to the borderlands as a man-made and socially constructed product where the identity of borderlands is shaped by the inhabitants interactions with the boundaries and with the state policies.¹⁵ However, I have found that the

⁸ Kemp, "The Dialectics of Village and State in Modern Thailand", 312-326; Turton, "Local Powers and Rural Differentiation".

⁹ Hirsch, *Development Dilemmas in Rural Thailand*.

¹⁰ Keyes, "The Proposed World of the School".

¹¹ Chatthip, "The Village Economy in Pre-Capitalist Thailand".

¹² Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*.

¹³ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

¹⁴ Baud, "Towards a Comparative History of Borderlands"; Yos, *Biodiversity, Local Knowledge and Sustainable Development*; Sturgeon, *Border Landscapes*.

¹⁵ Wilson, *Border Identities*; Newman, "The Lines That Continue to Separate Us".

state-society approaches applied in borderland studies are dominated by notions of antagonistic state-village relations: they could not comprehend the presence of the Lao migrants in the Thai border villages during cultivating season, and the interaction between borderland residents and the various levels of state authorities.

Living under the influence of trade liberalization and regional economic integration, the borderland people maintain everyday practices that have become informal and substantially illegal. Cross-border movement of agricultural labourers through social networks takes place along the borderlands. Internal and international migration is almost uncategorized because of the short distance of cross-river migration, similarities of appearances and of the languages of the Northeast Thailand and Lao villagers. What appears contradictory is that the local and provincial government authorities neither seem to be the strict agents who control the flow and movement of people and commodities across the border, nor ignorant agents seemingly unaware of what is going on. Instead, the different levels of state authorities turn a blind eye to the everyday practices of the villagers in terms of the illegal employment of Lao migrants, allowing them to stay longer than the cross-border regulations allow. In terms of borderland residents, they refer to historical ties and the social connections that exist between the Thai and Lao people to justify their everyday practices. While they do not deliberately disobey the law, at the same time they expect the state authorities to overlook their practices. Both state authorities and villagers, in turn, have become allies when the state allows the villagers to continue certain cross-border practices related to their economic and social lives. In returning, the villagers comply with the state authorities by coordinating border surveillance. This type of relationship, often termed 'the compromise of state-villager relations' is not only related to mutual concession between state agents and villagers, but also addresses the non-prominent form of the power of the state. On the one hand, the state has authority over demarcated administration and in controlling conformation law and order. But, on the other, state power is also bound with the local residents and has to adjust its desirable standards to encourage the collaboration of the local people.

Everyday Lives in Northeast Thailand and the Lao Border

While the Mekong River is a border, it is far from an obstacle. The river provides a magnificent route linking the borderland habitants of Northeast Thailand and Laos, a population that is engaged in cross-river activities related to employment, trade, family visits and participating in festivals, all of which constitute the everyday practices built upon their historical ties. The areas were considered part of a single polity until the late nineteenth century, when Siam was forced to cede the east bank of the river to France, and the west bank was incorporated into the modern Thai state. However, this did not end the existing family and socio-economic networks. Inter-marriage, small-scale cross-border trade, fisheries and re-settlement across the river have been regular practices for centuries, even during the Cold War when interaction between the borderland people was considerably reduced because of political tension at the border.

In this context, Ban Fangthai in the Northeast Thailand borderland and Ban Kaemkong, a village located on the opposite side of the Mekong River, constitute a group of Thai-Lao villagers who migrated from Ban Nam-Ngum, That Phanom District, Nakorn Phanom Province, approximately 10 kilometers north of Ban Fangthai. Villagers in Ban Fangthai and nearby villages regard themselves as Lao in terms of history and culture. But, tension and war over the last three decades have marked the border as a physical and social reality attributable to government administration and political and economic development. The end of the period of tension in the 1990s brought about regional cooperation and the re-opening of the Thai-Laos border. The interconnectivity between the unbalanced economies of Thailand and Laos was re-energized, including in Ban Fangthai and Ban Kaemkong which saw small-scale cross-border trade across the Mekong River gradually increase. This led to the establishment of a border flea market in the village, which operated Sunday mornings and Tuesday afternoons. Besides trading, the flea market became an open space for Thai-Lao people to meet and to update their social and economic lives. A number of long-tail boats from Laos carrying villagers and local traders across the Mekong River and the growing number of Lao people

moving across the Thai border became acquaintances for local people living in Ban Fangthai and the surrounding areas.



Figure 1: Research Sites (Provincial Level)

Of all the cross-border activities, I intentionally have focused upon the cross-border migration and employment that originated from social networks and the occasional meetings of the people in the flea market. Faced with labour shortages because of out-migration of the young generation to the urban areas, the Thai farmers in Ban Fangthai took advantage of their marginal location of agriculture to persuade the Lao workers from the opposite side of the river to work in the peak cultivating season from June to August and October to November.

According to many middle-aged people in Ban Fangthai and Ban Kaemkong, labour exchange across the river has been practiced for a long period. In a drought year that contributed to the underproduction of rice, many Lao villagers crossed the river hoping to exchange non-timber products for rice. Some opted to return to work in the paddy fields without pay the following year, an arrangement considered a regular practice in the everyday lives of Thai farmers.

In terms of Ban Kaemkong in Laos, I acquired information from one of the earliest settlers, Mrs. Pheng, an 84 year old woman and the oldest person living in Ban Kaemkong during the period of my fieldwork. Mrs. Pheng said that Ban Kaemkong used to be a location where many Thai fishermen built temporary shelters for fishing activities. Later, approximately 16 families moved to the area permanently, including her family members who moved from Ban Nam Kam, That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province. After their re-settlement, her family regularly return to visit relatives in the Thai village. Exchange of food, medicine and assistance were among the practices that eventually including travelling across the river to help her relatives who worked in the paddy fields in the Thai villages. Cross border marriages and the formation of families across the river had been typical occurrences for Thai-Lao people and had never been problematic in the past.¹⁶

The Mekong River became a borderline when the Lao government established Ban Kaemkong as a new village and the centre of administration of Sibulay District in 1979. The new settlement in the village comprised families of government officials from various parts of

¹⁶ Interview, Mrs. Pheng, 19 July 2010.

Laos who had moved to work in Ban Kaemkong as government officials, i.e., local public health staff, soldiers, polices and local governors. Ban Kaemkong became a centre of administration overseeing strict control of cross-border movement. After the 1990s, borderland residents witnessed simple changes in terms of the opening of the Mekong River and their ability to travel to the villages on the Thai border. Thus, significant cross-border activities, trade and employment had been re-established.

The State's Contemporary Border Control

From the late 1980s onward, economic liberalization and globalization significantly impacted the political and economic policies of both Thailand and Laos. Economic independence between the two countries had been growing through cross-border trade and investment. Thailand has undergone ideological shifts in terms of culture, participation and security.¹⁷ Influenced by economic liberalism, there has been a decline in the discourse on national security that had been a resource for state legitimacy.¹⁸ This saw the emergence of many new right-based discourses relating to development, democracy and social movement, which triggered significant advances in Thailand vis-a-vis an increased participation in state, political and economic development by different groups of people in society as demonstrated in a number of scholarly studies.¹⁹ From this analogy, the Thai government's policy on the borderland and the relationships with neighbouring countries turned from conflicts to cooperation in compliance with the movement towards openness and a market economy in Indochina. The 9th Economic Social Development Plan (2002-2006) also emphasised that the provinces along the NSEC (North-South Economic Corridor) and the EWEC (East-West Economic Corridor) should be developed as gateways for GMS countries.

¹⁷ Connors, "Goodbye to the Security State Thailand".

¹⁸ McCargo. *Reforming Thai Politics*.

¹⁹ Anek, *Business Associations and the New Political Economy of Thailand*; Pasuk, "Technocrats, Businessmen and Generals"; Prapat, *Politics on the Street*.

In terms of Laos, the country adopted a relatively comprehensive reform programme variously called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM), *Chin Thanakaan Mai*, or 'New Thinking'. This programme aimed at achieving a successful transition from a command to a market-driven economy, and from a subsistence mode of production to more advanced, private-sector-led agriculture under the guidance of the government. The NEM was the first formal step paving the way towards the economic liberalisation of Laos.²⁰ In 1996, the country also attended the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and in 2000, a Joint Trade Committee with Thailand was established. Along the 1,810 kilometer border, Thailand and Laos operate a total of 36 crossing points, 13 of which are permanent, 2 are temporary and 21 are local.²¹ With the opening of two friendship bridges to connect Nong Khai-Vientiane and Mukdahan-Savannakhet, cross border travel became easier and less expensive than before; but the policy of the Lao state was unclear. The Lao government seemed to be opposed to encouraging (or accepting) the greater mobility that might be an avenue of escape for householders and individuals struggling on low potential land in marginal areas.²²

²⁰ Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos*.

²¹ The Secretariat of the Senate, 2001. There are three scales of checkpoints between Thailand and Laos. The designation of checkpoints range from international checkpoint, temporary checkpoint and traditional checkpoint respectively: 1) An international checkpoint is a formal way of border crossing established with the approval of the government of Thailand and neighbouring countries to serve large volume of trade and travel. They are usually set up to reify the availability of transportation and channel links of communication between the major cities of each country or the route linking transport in regional or sub-regional areas. 2) A temporary checkpoint is opened for a particular reason and time. The Ministry of Interior is authorized to assign the opening of the temporary crossing point. 3) The local checkpoint is opened for small trade and local products that are crucial for the everyday lives of the borderland residents. Its main objective is to encourage local humanitarian relationships as the checkpoint is the route that local people from neighbouring countries take to come to Thailand for medical treatment. The amount of trade and products that passes through these checkpoints is limited to 500,000 TB/day. Authorized by the Ministry of Interior, the Chief of Provincial Governor is able to make an agreement with the Provincial Governor of the neighbouring countries to consider appropriation of a checkpoint.

²² Rigg, "A Particular Place?"

While the state attempted to incorporate poor people and areas into the market system to avoid the migration of the rural labour force to urban areas, there was little evidence that the rural areas had been invigorated to the extent that this objective will become anything more than a paper wish.²³ Furthermore, some policy analysts would see Laos as a fragile state with weak institutions and governance and as unresponsive to liberalization.²⁴

Benefiting from the positive direction of Thai-Lao economic and political policies, the number of Lao people crossing the Mekong River to the Ban Fangthai market has continuously increased over the ten years since the re-opening of the Thai-Lao border. A former village head from 1995 to 2009 estimated that more than 200 Lao people came to the market on Sundays during the period he held the position.²⁵ Furthermore, the employment of the Lao people in the paddy fields had become commonplace along the villages near the Mekong River. During the cultivating season, Thai farmers came to wait for the boat carrying Lao workers from the Lao side to dock so that they could get daily workers. Farmers sometimes competed to get Lao workers during the peak season by offering higher wages.

In 2003, drug and human trafficking increased dramatically along the border. The huge quantities of addictive methamphetamine trafficked into Thailand across the border resulted in the War on Drugs policy initiated by the Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. New mechanisms for cross-border cooperation were launched to improve surveillance and tighten enforcement measures along the border zones. High ranking Mukdahan provincial governors who were in charge of border security provided an overview of border control in Mukdahan resulting in one international checkpoint at the Friendship Bridge, and one temporary checkpoint in Don Tan District, and six local checkpoints in the villages spread along the Mekong River Bank. In order to establish a cross-border checkpoint, both the Thai and Lao governments had to seek mutual agreement on the location and measure of border control.

²³ Rigg, "A Particular Place?", 174.

²⁴ Commins, "Goodbye to the Security State Thailand and Ideological Change".

²⁵ Interview, Mr. Srinuan Wongwai, 9 July 2010.

The head of Phong Kham Sub-district,²⁶ who was involved in the establishment of the checkpoint of Ban Fangthai, stated that he was called to attend a meeting with the Provincial Governor of the Northeast borderlands, several District Governors, all of the heads of Sub-districts along the borders, and representatives of the Thai Royal Navy. During this meeting, a new strategy for border control was launched. As part of the strategy, requirements were established to restrict the boat mooring area and to record and report on the movement of the Lao people coming to Thailand. The communities boat points system was established to replace the traditional checkpoints (the areas to cross the Mekong River by kinship relations). The Mekong Riverine Operation Unit (MROU) is involved in surveillance of the Mekong River border. At the same time, local people and communities are involved to maintain security and order to prevent illegal commodities and drugs, which is the authority of Mukdahan Province and the governor is at the top of the organization chart.

Although Ban Fangthai has been the hub of cross-border activities in Wan Yai District, the scale of cross-border trade was too small to establish a temporary checkpoint that required additional government budget and resources to manage. The village instead became an informal local checkpoint where village committees, local police volunteers and the patrol police were required to monitor all cross-border movements and record the names of Lao people who crossed the border on Sundays and Tuesdays. The village committee agreed to charge a five baht fee from all Lao people who entering Ban Fangthai. The fee was recorded and used to support community activities and to purchase coffee, drinks and miscellaneous items for village committees who conducted voluntary surveillance at the border during the night shift. All cross-border activities and border security issues had to be reported to the Wan Yai District governors and Mukdahan Provincial governor. The border control policy and the regulations administered by government authorities were printed on a big steel board near the river bank. The main objectives of the regulation were to limit the time of cross border activities to be from 04.00 am to 20.00 pm only, to zoning

²⁶ Interview, Mr. Thanakit Muangkhot, 10 July 2010.

the boat parking areas, and ensuring that no border activity violated the Thai laws. Nothing related to cross-border employment appeared on the sign; the villagers understood that employing Lao workers during the peak cultivating season was permitted. But the Thai farmers had to report the employment of workers to the village head and promise to return their workers to Laos before 06.00 pm. Lao workers were not permitted to stay overnight in Thai border areas, except other than in cases of emergency as determined by the village head.

Parallel to the establishment of a checkpoint in Ban Fangthai, a local checkpoint in Laos was established. The village head of Ban Kaemkong confirmed that the Lao government authorities had acknowledged the rule of cross-border employment that only permitted daily movement across the border.²⁷ The village committees in Laos had to record the names of Lao people who crossed the river to the flea market and to work in the Thai border areas. Consistent with the Thai regulations, Lao migrants were permitted to accept wage job only in the Thai borderlands; they were not permitted to stay overnight. Having heard about the five baht fee to cross into Thai territory, the Lao local authorities in the borderlands decided to charge a 20 baht fee for whoever used the local checkpoint in Ban Kaemkong to cross to the Sunday and Tuesday market in Thailand. This fee was utilised by Lao officers, including the patrol police, village committees and soldiers who conducted voluntary surveillance at the border.

Taking Advantages of Border Location: Thai-Lao Farmers and State Authorities

Agriculture is the top-ranking economic activity in Mukdahan Province. Out of 91,019 households, agricultural households are approximately 58,154 households or 70.15%. Significant economic crops of the province are rice, rubber, sugarcane and cassava.²⁸

Facing labour shortages because of out-migration of the young generation to urban areas, farmers in Ban Fangthai take advantage of their marginal location of agriculture to fill the labour gap. It would not

²⁷ Interview, Mr. Anurak, 16 July 2010.

²⁸ Governor of Mukdahan, "2010-2012 Provincial Development Plan".

be problematic if farmers maintained the traditional practice of hiring relatives or friends living in the Lao border villages who could travel to work on a daily basis. In reality, cross-border activities during the cultivating season are considerably more complex. Circumstances range from trifling – where no government representatives at either the local or district level inspect the border during the peak cultivating season – to more significant, e.g., cases where the Thai farmers allowed many Lao seasonal workers to stay overnight either in their homes or in the small huts in the middle of their paddy fields. This was often the case among workers from remote villages in the Lao hinterland who could not travel back and forth in one day.

Another issue was the conflict of interest among state agents such as the village head and district government officials responsible for enforcing the laws and regulations in the borderlands. At the same time, many of the local villagers who owned the farmland and demanded labourers, employed and kept Lao workers in their houses. As one of the local governors said: “Hiring Lao workers to work in the paddy fields is not a criminal offence, as long as we can confirm that all of them return to Laos upon the end of cultivating season.”

I noted additional cases of ambiguity in cross-border regulations when I returned to interview the district officials and high-ranking provincial governors who were in charge of security along the Thai-Lao border. All state agents acknowledged that Thai farmers allowed Lao migrant workers to stay overnight in the village. They said they opted to turn a blind eye as it was not considered a threat to the country’s security. They categorized cross-border employment as a necessity as it helped the villagers manage their agricultural livelihoods. I requested to see the documents describing the rules and regulations related to the operation of the checkpoint during the peak cultivating season, but they refused to allow me to peruse these documents. They explained that they allow relatively minor offences to occur in exchange for local cooperation in terms of observing drug trafficking and human smuggling in the borderlands. “If the villagers become un-cooperative,

it would be very difficult for us to work and control border security,” one of the high-ranking provincial governors stated.²⁹

There were also inconsistencies between the regulations and their implementation on the Lao side. First, the cross-border fee was mediated by the social relations of involved individuals in that the residents of Ban Kaemkong were requested to pay the set amount of 20 baht, but outsiders had to pay a different rate varying from 20 to 100 baht. Lao people from several villages besides Ban Kaemkong reported that they paid more than 20 baht to leave for Ban Fangthai. I also paid the higher rate, but it was reduced from time to time. During my fieldwork, I regularly travelled across the Mekong River between Ban Fangthai and Ban Kaemkong, I was required to pay a 100 baht fee the first time. The soldiers explained that this was the outsider rate. After staying in the village for a few months and having become acquaintance with the local officials, I was allowed to pay the local rate of 20 baht. In cases where the border soldiers were familiar with me and had become key informants for my research, I was not required to pay a fee.

The second feature was similar to what happened on the Thai border in terms of the role of state agents, i.e., the expectation that they would enforce the laws. Thai officials chose to turn a blind eye to the Lao workers' infractions in exchange for cooperation from the villagers on more serious matters. The state agents at the Lao border were aware that many Lao people stayed in Thai villages until the end of the cultivating season; but, instead of arresting them, they charged them an informal fee upon their returned to Laos.

As mentioned earlier, I included one more village in the Lao hinterland among my research sites and followed the largest group of residents to their village – Ban Laonua. When stepping on the river bank at Ban Kaemkong, two border soldiers whom I regularly met requested the Laonua villagers pay 100 baht, but they told me not to pay the fee.³⁰ Asked why the Lao migrants had to pay the fee, one of the Lao soldiers told me that “If they went to shop in Thailand, we would not request them to pay on the way back since they spent only half day

²⁹ Interview, Head of Mukdahan Provincial Security Affairs, 20 January 2011.

³⁰ I also paid a 100 baht fee and told the soldiers that it was unfair to charge the Lao, their brotherhood people, 100 baht but let me pass for free.

in Thai border. But, for people who went to stay overnight on the Thai side, if they travelled daily, they would have to pay 20 baht per day anyway. They might stay longer than a week so the fee of 100 baht was a lump sum fee.”³¹

I initially considered the practices in the Lao borderlands as representative of a violent and exploitive relationship between the state and the people. However, I gradually learned from my ethnographic fieldwork that it was common for the Lao state agents to demand extra money for some specific purposes. When I arrived at Ban Laonua, I was requested to pay 800 baht to the village committees (8 people, at a rate of 100 baht/person). Instead, I paid 100 baht and bought beer for all of them. I later learned from the Lao villagers and from another researcher that payment was required because my stay in the village created more tasks for the village committees who had to ensure my safety.³² In the case of the Lao people, they all knew that they had illegally left for Thailand without documents, and that over-staying in Thailand meant that they could be arrested by Thai or Lao state agents. Paying state agents at the border was considered an investment as it secured them from being arrested by the Lao police and protected their opportunities to profit from working in Thailand. As many of them said: “If we did not pay, we would be caught by the Lao police and put in jail.” Asked what they would do if they were questioned by the Thai police, some migrants who had experienced long-distance migration to Bangkok and had been arrested before, stated that: “I would prefer to pay the Thai police. They might charge me 3,000 baht and let me go. If I do not pay, they will send me back to Laos and I will have to pay the Lao police to not put me in jail anyway. Paying Thai police and staying in Thailand means I still have a chance to earn more money.”

What I had learned in the borderlands clearly demonstrated that both the villagers and state agents in the remote areas were acting independently from the central government. In the Thai borderlands, the state authorities and villagers were dependent upon each other through cooperative arrangements. In Laos, the state agents enjoyed the benefit

³¹ Interview, Lao patrol police, 6 November 2010.

³² Ian Baird who had worked in Laos for more than 10 years, kindly gave commented on this point when I discussed extra-payment in Laos.

from extra-fees, while the villagers benefited from low risk migration. Both villagers and local government officials actively collaborate to avoid control by the central government.

Conclusion: The Compromise Margins

The subject of state-village relationships and cross-boundary migration in Northeast Thailand and Laos encourages the rethinking of state-society relations, the nature of state power and the bridging position of the local government officials and the local people. This case highlights the nature of state power and relations with national borders in the different contexts of Thailand and Laos. While security of the state and good governance were formally ensured by obedience to law and order and diffusion of the border posed a threat to the nation-state, the case of the Northeast Thailand border reveals that to keep the active collaboration of the borderland residents, the state has to be flexible and allow the illegal cross-border activities to continue. The case in the borderland of Northeast Thailand demonstrates the growing interaction between the state and the villagers, among whom state agents are also local farmers. As Peter Evans suggests, these activities support the synergetic relations between state and society.³³ The state cannot work effectively without detailed information from non-government actors and ties that connect citizens and public officials to which he called 'embeddedness autonomy'.

In terms of socialist Laos as opposed to Thai policy, which is often considered to exercise state power and its element of control over the Lao people, cross-border migration from Laos to Thailand has been based on collaboration between local state agents and the Lao villagers who join together to elude central government control, ensuring that both parties profit. These cases relate to expectations of how the state should perform for its own citizens. This involves state functionality and state power in the borderlands. Both state officials and residents have compromised and extracted benefits by re-negotiating the extant regulations.

³³ Evans. *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*.

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