Capturing Otherness:
Self-Identity and Feelings of Non-Belonging Among Educated Burmese in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper explores the subjective experiences of migrants engaged in producing alternative modes of self-identification and in creating a new basis for their collective identity. Through the analysis of personal narratives, this article examines the dialectic movement between complex political and social constructions of Otherness and processes of self-identification among English-educated lowland Burmese living in Thailand. It investigates the meanings and perceptions attached to the different terms used as identity frameworks in popular discourse among Thai and among Burmese themselves and looks into how these terms and attached meanings are appropriated and acted upon in different contexts. The migrants involved in this research come from vastly different backgrounds and ideologies, but they share in common being from the Burman ethnic majority, or having lived and studied among Burman, and identifying themselves in terms of civic identity, which is reflected by the term 'Burmese'. Once in Thailand, their situation is complicated because in their everyday life they have to face the Thai construction of being Burmese, known as 'Pama', a term associated with the historical enemy in Thai nationalist discourse. The contact that educated Burmese have with Thai classmates or co-workers is relatively limited due to the general mistrust Thai people tend to have towards them. The educated Burmese migrants also have to confront their national Other, the members of minorities from the secessionist states who compose the majority of migrants in Thailand. In this context, their own Burmeseness, which they rarely had to question before they left Yangon or Mandalay, appears suddenly as it is: an identity deeply fragmented that needs to be captured and reappropriated.

Key words: Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, migration, identity, feeling of belonging

Introduction

> For Burmese, Thailand is like a step-mother; she will be nice to you outwardly but nobody knows how many times you will be pinched, squeezed or starved. 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Yin Soe, Lecturer, Bangkok[1]

Adaptation to the host society is regularly presented as the ultimate goal or quest for migrants, sojourners or refugees. Studies on intergroup relations in the context of migration tend to emphasize patterns of exclusion and the need to belong or the suffering generated by a specific state of not belonging. Abdelmalek Sayad (2004), in his provocative essay on the subjective experiences of Kabyle migrants in France, writes:

> Any study of migratory phenomena that overlooks the emigrants' conditions of origin is bound only to give a view that is at once partial and ethnocentric. On the one hand, it is only the immigrant – and not the emigrant – who is taken into consideration, rather as though his life began the moment he came to France. On the other hand, the problematic, both explicit and implicit, is always that of adaptation to the 'host' society. As a result, and useful as they may be, analyses of the immigrants' world are in danger of trapping themselves into two equally abstract and reductive discourses (2004: 29).

Ball and Sinha-Kerkhoff (2010: 92-93) argue that migrants have more 'narratives of belonging at their disposal'. These narratives can be located in the motherland and/or in the host society. According to these authors, the choice of belonging is shaped by the process of migration itself and depends partly on the political will of the host country to accept multiple narratives by allowing double citizenship. Drawing from Brubaker (2005), they further stress that the concept of diaspora can help in explaining the multiplicity of narratives of belonging but shows also great limitations unless it is perceived as a 'category of practices that allows for individual choices, needs and claims' (2005: 94) instead of an identity. For Eriksen (2002: 154), many minority members, which for him include immigrants, diaspora and refugees, participate in two national political systems, thus practicing what Benedict Anderson called long-distance nationalism (ibid; Anderson 1992). In narratives of belonging, the homeland is often essentialized and captured through a series of portraits, and feelings of belonging are sometimes confused with longing and suffering as a consequence of abrupt de-territorialization. Narratives also produce new understandings of homeland and homeness. The complex make-up of migrant communities – which is most of the time absent from host communities' public representations - together with the translocation of internal boundaries shaped by economics, status, ethnic differences and ideologies in the home country, can deeply challenge the emotive construction of the homeland as conveyed in individual narratives. Bhikhu Parekh (2008: 39) reminds us that collective identity is always essentialized: 'The political struggle for the recognition of identity and the promotion of interests associated

with it generates a pressure for the unity of views and purpose, and encourages its essentialisation' (2008: 39).

This essentialization in turn, is often reappropriated by the migrants themselves, producing new versions of their identity and alternative modes of internal dynamics. In the case of migrants originating from ethnically and ideologically divided nations, this essentialization opens the door for an imaginary unified home and sets the ground for reaching out to the co-national Other. The politics of identity recognition emphasizes distinctiveness (Eriksen 2002: 143) as a key component of intergroup relations and sometimes as a motive for resisting assimilation: distinctiveness in the host society with the potential of fostering new bonds among co-national immigrants. In this regard, mobility opens the possibility to redefine oneself through alternative logics of belonging, even more so in cases where the nation of origin's power has became an intrinsic part of the popular and political imagination. New identity frameworks, which downplay ethnic or class divisions, are made operative, for example, frameworks based on shared oppression and victimhood. In an essay on Sierra Leone refugees and asylum seekers, Ferme (2004: 87) notes that the far-reaching power of the oppressive state shapes the everyday life of individuals far beyond the nation's borders. Her insights, as well as Sayad's and Bhikhu Parekh's, as I will demonstrate later, interestingly resonate with my own observation of the condition of the Burmese currently living in Thailand.

This paper tries to capture the logics of belonging and non-belonging through the subjective experiences of English-educated Burmese in Thailand. The first part of this paper explores the social and political boundaries existing between the English-educated Burmese and their immediate Others, who are primarily represented by Thai nationals and by Burmese labour migrants and refugees from Burma's Shan state.[2] I contend that the politics of naming and labelling is central to the maintenance of these boundaries, which in turn reflect already existing social hierarchies. The second part discusses the emergence of the feeling of oneness and solidarity among English-educated Burmese from different backgrounds and migration statuses. In this regard, the concept of victimhood, especially as it is developed in the writing of the French sociologist Michel Wieviorka (2005), helps to capture new meanings attached to Burmeseness beyond civic or ethnic modes. I also try to demonstrate that the feeling of not belonging is a crucial part of the process of adapting to a relatively hostile social environment. I further contend that the current immigration laws in Thailand have

an important role to play in fostering feelings of non-belonging among educated migrants, at least as much as other factors. I also argue that the social distance between the Burmese migrants in general and the Thai citizens provides great incentives to foster unity among the once extremely polarized Burmese, at least from the English-educated Burmese perspective, once they are in Thailand. Between 2007 and 2010 I conducted 125 interviews and collected narratives in Bangkok, Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. During this period, three major events deeply affected the Burmese people: the Saffron Revolution of October 2007, the cyclone Nargis in 2008, and the announcement by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 2009 of the November 2010 elections. These events considerably shaped the way Burmeseness and relations with the host country were reassessed among the educated Burmese living in Thailand.

According to the *Irrawaddy*, today at least 200 Burmese enter Thailand through Mae Sot every day (*Irrawady*, 17 January 2008).[3] Currently, 2 million Burmese, both documented and undocumented, are estimated to be living in Thailand (Yang 2009). The English-educated Burmese represent a very small percentage of this group, less than 1 per cent. The choice of focusing on this particular group was triggered by the fact that university students in Burma are perceived to be, by the current ruling military regime, the SPDC, a constant force of potential contestation (Campbell 2008: 182). For the general lowland Burmese population, university students and former graduates hold a relatively high status and since the British colonial period have been popularly associated with the quest for political and social justice. Not surprisingly, the status they have achieved back home shifts dramatically once they cross the border. In this sense, their case is certainly not unique, as migration produces new hierarchies and self-identification frameworks. The control that the Burmese state continues to hold on its citizens or even former citizens abroad is far reaching and extremely troubling and, as I will try to demonstrate, the potential force of contestation they once represented back home is completely annihilated once they are in Thailand. Among these English-educated Burmese are ethnic Burman (Bama'r), ethnic Chinese, and members of minority groups.[4] All have been urban dwellers at least one point during their academic life in Burma; most of them have lived in the former capital, Yangon (Rangoon), or in Mandalay, and received part of their university education in the English language. Once in Thailand, they study or work in places where they can use the English language, and generally use both Burmese and

English languages in their daily interactions, but almost never the Thai language. The narratives of their coming to Thailand vary considerably: some have crossed the border to study or for the purpose of work, others have fled persecution as political dissidents.[5] Far from constituting a homogenous group, educated Burmese in Thailand represent a highly complex community, which includes university students, academics, journalists, political analysts, aid workers, engineers and artists. They are short- and long-term migrants, documented and undocumented; a significant number of pro-democracy activists do not hold any valid passport. Their political views also cover a wide range of positions; even among pro-democracy activists drastically competing ideas and ideologies exist. On one hand, what these tertiary-educated Burmese migrants have in common is the awareness of being constructed as the Other in Thai popular discourse, and on the other hand, of seeing their own Burmeseness challenged by the overwhelming presence of Burmese from ethnic minority groups, such as the Shan. The Shan are viewed as menacing back home because they challenge the national unity. My main interest lies in these university students' and former students' processes of identification after they have settled in Thailand.

The Self-Identification Process and Burmeseness

If being Burmese is already a rather complicated issue in Thailand, the construction of Burmeseness remains even more problematic among the different categories of migrants arriving every day from Burma. The demographic make-up of Burma is extremely complex, however systematically simplified by the SPDC.[6] To date no proper census has been conducted by the current regime – or, if a census has been collected, it has not been made public. However, eight major ethnic groups are sometimes identified as follows: Bama'r or Burman (which constitute a 65 percent majority), Rakhine, Shan, Mon, Chin, Kayin, Kayah or Karenni and Kachin (Matthews 2001; Rajah 2001; Tin Maung Maung Than 2004; Robinne 2008; Gravers 2007). The categorization of 135 'national races' was defined by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the former name of the ruling military junta, as the basis for its 'Myanmarization process', in opposition to the eight-race categorization put forward by the British during the colonial period (Gravers 2007: 4). Nevertheless, Burman dominance remained an intrinsic part of the formation of the state despite the widely publicized statement that the name of Burma was changed to Myanmar precisely

to encompass all the 135 'national races'. According to the junta, Burma refers only to the ethnic Burman. Along the borders, on the other hand, where minority groups have formed nationalist movements empowered by their own armies, such as the Shan, the Mon, Karen, and the Kachin, the categorization of threatening secessionist groups supersedes the 135 national race model (Kampe 1997: 4), and thus triggers the SPDC to engage much more drastic policy measures and interference. In this context, government policies have been so far essentially offensive and reactive, directed towards containing or cracking down on separatist movements. More important for this study is the fact that, for the Burman majority, collective identity had been slowly de-ethnicized years before Ne Win and his repressive military rule began in 1962, which marked the beginning of political oppression in the country.

The strong ethnic conscientization in post-colonial Burma has indeed led to creating the Burmese nation around the cultural, linguistic and political Burmanization process (Callahan 2003: 157), equating Burmaness with Burmeseness, thus producing a civic-focused framework that has always been incapable of accommodating the minority groups of the frontier areas. Callahan notes,

> Burmanization did not create problems for most elites, so this process was seen as a natural and uncontroversial step in the decolonization process. In the frontier areas, however, many ethnic minorities saw the situation differently. They did not want the country to undergo political, cultural, and linguistic Burmanization (Callahan 2003: 157).

The strongly Burman-centred post-colonial government implicitly supported a social hierarchy through which minority languages were popularly deemed backward if not imminently threatening for the nation-building process (Thomson 1995; see also Fink 2009).[7] According to my own observation, this social hierarchy has continued to shape the self-identification process of educated lowland Burmese, even among those who have settled in Thailand. A female lecturer, who had been living in Bangkok for 14 years, mentioned that while she was living in Yangon she had never been aware of using the term Bama'r in ethnic terms. For her, everyday language does not convey a sense of separateness between being Burmese and being Burman as is the case in English. Being Burmese is a choice, and, as another female university lecturer in Bangkok put it: 'nobody wants to be associated with an oppressive group', in reference to the Burman. For both lecturers, using the term 'Burman' to describe who they are does not have any appeal and they do not feel at ease using an identity framework that demarcates them

in ethnic terms. The same appears to be true for most Burmans after entering Thailand. It is when they arrive in Thailand that their ethnic make-up re-appears, largely through the daily interactions with Shan, Karen, and other representatives of Burmese ethnic minorities.

Aung Naing Oo, a political analyst in exile living in Chiang Mai, argues that being Burmese is a choice that one can make whatever one's ethnic background. Aung Naing Oo once asked his father: 'What is my ethnic make-up?'[8] To this question, his father explained that his father's great grandfather was Arkenese, an ethnic community from the northern part of the country. For business reasons he moved to lowland Burma and met a Burman woman who became his wife. Aung Naing Oo was even more surprised by the story of his ancestor when he learned that both his own father and mother were born in a Mon village in the western part of the country. He pondered the possibility that he might have Mon blood as well. According to him, due to socialist rule and Ne Win's strong focus on national identity, most Burman were not conscious of their specific ethnic make-up. It is only in the wake of the 1988 uprising that the quest for identity consciously arose, prompting many to choose to describe themselves as Burmese first while recognizing their ethnic make-up, even when born from mixed ethnic parentage.

Localizing their ethnic make-up is an act of high relevance for political thinkers and activists because it helps to exemplify the multi-ethnic and encompassing character of the democratization project. As for Aung Naing Oo, he made this conscious choice during the uprising of 1988, and that choice reflects opting for the nation beyond any alternative mode of identification. In this context, recognizing that ethnicity is 'not in the blood', but is indeed constructed, becomes an extremely important part of the process of self-identification for many Burmese who would officially be identified as Burman by the Burmese administration. In a similar move, educated Burmese who once felt a stronger affiliation to their ethnic background also make the choice to identify primarily with the larger community of Burmese in time of collective crisis without necessarily forgetting their own ethnic identity. Not surprisingly, the Saffron Revolution was a powerful trigger, as was the case with a Burmese student of Chinese descent who was already living in Chiang Mai when the tragic event took place in the streets of Yangon:

> In Yangon, I never questioned who I was. I saw myself as Chinese; it was really clear to me. However, when I watched on TV Burmese military shooting on monks during the Saffron Revolution, I became extremely angry and hopeless. I suddenly felt a lot of solidarity with other Burmese and started

seeing myself as Burmese instead of Chinese. I also started feeling strongly about the bad treatment Burmese get in Thailand. I looked at my passport and became conscious of being from Myanmar, of being Burmese.[9]

Another student, an ethnic Mon woman studying in a Bangkok university, explained that when she first moved from the Mon state to Yangon to pursue undergraduate studies, she saw herself as quite different from the other students:

> The first year was quite challenging. Other students were looking at me as someone from a minority group. However, over time, I started identifying myself more in terms of being Burmese and less as a Mon. This is not that I was trying to hide my Mon identity, but just that at the university, everybody is Burmese, and nobody thinks themselves as coming from minority groups. I think it has more to do with living in Yangon. In the city, people tend to see themselves differently. So yes, I can say I am Burmese. Only a few months after I arrived in Bangkok, I witnessed the Saffron Revolution on television. I saw monks being shot by the military; I also felt very Burmese, even if I am Christian. It does not matter to which ethnic group or religion we belong, when Burmese are tortured and killed, we know that it can also happen to any of us.

The Politics of Naming

In the English language, the difference between ethnic and national identity is made clear. The ethnic majority in current Burma is referred to as Burman while the civic identity is referred to by the terms 'Burmese' or 'Myanmarese'. This distinction, however, does not exist as such in the Burmese language. The awareness of equating Burmeseness with Burmaness is not so obvious among the educated Burmese because thinking in terms of ethnic identity is definitely not part of the everyday interaction among Yangon's tertiary-educated people. Therefore, when the Burmese speak in English, it is possible for them to assert relatively clearly how they want to be identified. This is not so much the case in the Burmese language, and how they want to be identified will be interpreted differently according to the specific context. The use of the term 'Bamar' is more frowned upon by the younger generation of educated Burman who now favour the term 'Myanmar', which is believed to encompass all ethnic groups. Most, if not all, tertiary-educated Burmese now in Thailand have spent some years at one point or another in Yangon or Mandalay, to pursue a university degree before leaving. Yangon and Mandalay, the major cities of lowland Burma, are still today considered the centre of power (Mya Maung 1990: 611) and

of high education. However, Burman represents mainly the distinctive majority group that has led the country since independence and has limited its own access to power (ibid). On the other hand, the term Burma has become an obvious political statement on the international platform. The choice of using Burma or Myanmar at the diplomatic level pertains directly to the recognition (or lack of recognition) of the ruling SPDC, who in turn refused to hand over power to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Liberal Democratic Party after their landslide election victory in 1990.

On a more personal level, the boundary between the two is blurred by the fact that in the Burmese language, the terms only constitute two pronunciation and written variants of the same word and both refer to the ethnic majority. For many students I encountered, the less problematic term is 'Myanmar': 'I come from a country now called Myanmar, I am Myanmar', exclaimed a post-graduate student in Chiang Mai. Her statement represents well in my view the distinction made by the younger generation of the tertiary-educated Burmese who do not want to be defined through their ethnic background. For this student, as for others, the English term 'Burmese' is problematic as it also means the Bama'r majority: Burman, a term well known among the older generation of political exiles is not popular among the younger, educated migrants. Some of the older generation of pro-democracy activists, see in this labelling a systematic political stance. This is in my view a perspective built up in the pro-democracy language of international Burmese support groups; many educated youth, mostly, if not all from relatively privileged economic backgrounds, come to Thailand without any defined political views or even interest in understanding democratization processes. Their knowledge of what is happening in their country is one-sided and thus, limited due to extreme censorship and lack of access to foreign news. What they should call themselves is not questioned until they arrive in Thailand.

For the general Thai public, Burmese images correspond to one category of migrants, the 'Pama', whose members share more or less common characteristics, many of which are unabatedly derogative. In everyday life as well as in the public discourse, the complex ethnic make-up of what constitutes being Burmese is generally not addressed. Only in the northern part of Thailand, where a solidarity movement in support of the ethnic Shan has became stronger over the years, a distinction between Burmese in general and Tai Yai, the popular name given to the Tai-speaking ethnic groups of the Shan state, will

sometimes be emphasized. Nevertheless, anyone acquainted with the Thai public portrayal of minorities will know that the politics of differentiating the Shan from other Burmese nationals is mainly a question of rhetoric. In practice, discrimination is as strong for the Shan as it is for other Burmese migrants, although the form it takes is based less on historical enmity and more on social status. In general, 'Pama', for the average Thai citizen, refers to anyone coming from Burma/Myanmar, without regard for the ethnicity or region of origin. The name 'Pama' is a deformation of Bama'r and captures, in popular discourse, both the unskilled labour migrants and the brutal historical enemy who invaded and captured Ayutthaya in the eighteenth century. The term is highly pejorative and triggers feelings of fear and mistrust. Burmese migrants are regularly portrayed as transgressors and threats to Thailand national security by both Thai state agencies and the media (Grundy-Warr and Wong 2002: 95). 'As soon as I mention that I am Burmese, people stop talking to me', noted a male graduate student living in Chiang Mai. Burmese migrants are regularly the target of robbery, taxi overpricing and police-bribery practices. Police officers who indulge in bribery have no problem justifying their actions along the well-known lines of 'avenging their forefathers'. From their school years on, Thai citizens learn to dislike and mistrust the Burmese with an unchallenged nationalistic passion. Feelings of mistrust are deeply rooted and rarely challenged or thought over. *In Search of Sunlight*, a published series of narratives collected among Burmese grassroot migrants in Thailand, powerfully echoes these acts of systematic discrimination and even hatred routinely faced by the dislocated individuals. According to the editor of the collection, the Burmese suffer prejudices to a much greater extent in comparison to Cambodian or Laotian migrants:

> Since the onset of the economic crisis in Thailand in mid-1997, migrant workers have become scapegoats, accused of stealing jobs from the local people and of being the cause of unemployment for two million Thai citizens. Moreover, nationalist propaganda promoting the patriotic notion of 'loving only one's own nation and undermining the others', has made these people from Burma a 'threat to national security' in the eyes of many Thais. Such displaced people from Burma are indiscriminately branded as thieves, murderers, rapists, drug traffickers, and prostitutes and blamed for spreading infectious diseases. Furthermore, the Thais who help or support 'the Burmese' are also labeled as those who do not love their own country (Pim Koetsawang 2001: 22).

The author also mentioned that migrant labour workers suffer dis-

crimination more deeply compared to the political asylum seekers. This statement, however, can be contested, as in the following case: Myint Htun (not his real name), a former journalist and student deeply involved in opposition movements, escaped the military and crossed the border illegally after four years hiding in the countryside. In Thailand he reached Chiang Mai first and applied for a scholarship for Burmese exiles and moved to Bangkok to join one of the most reputable universities of the country and study political science. There all his friends were other Burmese and Westerners. Although the courses were in English, Thai students would rarely engage with him, and when they did, it was always formally, as they would do with all other Burmese students. It was even more difficult to understand because part of the program was concerned with human rights issues and many Thai students were hoping to find a job in human rights advocacy organizations. According to Myint Htun, he would never shy away from talking to his classmates about his own experiences. After completing his undergraduate studies he moved back to the border area and found a job with an international organization assisting the relocation of refugees in a third country. His experience with Thai non-governmental organization (NGO) workers was not much better:

> I feel discriminated against all the time by my Thai co-workers. They look down on me and keep the interactions to the minimum. Their attitude is completely different with Americans and Europeans however. These NGOs are supposed to be there to help and support the Burmese people, but they still look down on Burmese co-workers.

This example is by no means unique. Embracing the 'democracy cause' and human rights as a social movement and form of identity does not erase the contradiction of supporting, on the one hand, international movements and NGO practices promoted in the West, and on the other hand, continuing to maintain, at the personal level, deep-rooted feelings of mistrust and condescension.

The Reactive Other: Minorities from the Border States

In 2004, Ab Carabao, a Thai folk singer extremely popular among the Thai rural poor, produced an album called *Mai Tong Rong Hai* (Don't cry), entirely dedicated to the plea and suffering of the Tai Yai from the secessionist Shan state. From tunes originally written by Bob Marley he rewrote lyrics reminding his Thai followers that the Shan insurgency, to which he became a strong advocate, should be understood in the

context of the historical brutality of the Burmese (Pama) towards the peace-loving Thai. By pointing out to the Thai that the Tai Yai have been victims of the Burmese and are 'blood brothers', the underlying script of the songs reinforces the powerful stereotype of the Burmese as enemies of the Thai. In its April 2006 issue, the *Irrawaddy* examined the popular image of the Shan insurgency commander as conveyed by the media and artists such as Ab Carabao and noted:

> What emerges in the various media portraits of Yawd Serk and the Shan independence movement is an effort to cast them as long-lost Thai brethren, whose struggles against an oppressive regime have historical parallels to Thailand's past conflicts with Burma – and, therefore, should inspire sympathy for their cause.

Two frameworks are at play. One is being Burmese - the historical Other in Thai nationalist discourse - the history schoolbook villains who invaded the heavenly capital of Ayutthaya. The second is being associated with Tai Yai, modern-day illegal migrants, a category represented as 'transgressors and threats by state agencies and the media' (Grundy-Warr and Wong 2002: 95) in Thailand and as violent separatists in Burma. Tai Yai women are often constructed as praiseworthy domestic workers: 'they are like us', maintained a Thai female university professor from Chiang Mai respectfully, 'We (the Thai) can trust them in our home; they are not real Burmese; they are trustworthy and compassionate'. This depiction of Shan Tai Yai women draws the boundaries with the 'Other' in historical and linguistic terms, leaving other Burmese migrants alienated as much from a large section of their co-nationals as from the Thai nationals. In *Plastic Nation*, Pavin Chachavalpongpun remarks:

> Up until 1988, the Thai governments, with the backing of the military, invented and reinvented Burma as the personification of the historical enemy. In the meantime, Thai elites transformed the Shans, known as Tai Yai (big Tai), and other border minorities into part of a greater Thai family to glorify the notion of Thainess. The extension of the Thai ethno-family offered the title of historical friends to those ethnic minorities (2005: 59).

For the Shan migrants who have escaped the brutality of the Burmese military, the contact with Burman exiles remains difficult, coloured with distrust and even hatred. For the Burman activists in exile on the other hand, the failure of their movements in fostering changes in their homeland, and even the brutal crackdown on monks and civilians during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, have already been linked to the lack of involvement of the national minorities of border states (see for example the *Irrawaddy*, November 2007). Displaced Shan minorities have the

potential to develop a sense of belonging to Thailand once they cross the border due to shared language and traditions. The degree of lack of solidarity between the border state minorities and Burmese lowlanders is reflected partly in the type of relations that take place on the other side of the border. Predictable as it sounds, other forces are at play as the structure of power relations shifts dramatically in Thailand, generating new experiences and new subjectivities. When they land on Thai soil for the first time, educated lowland Burmese understand ethnic dynamics in terms of rhetoric only and therefore, becoming suddenly aware of the increasingly large number of Burmese coming from the border state is quite shocking. The term Tai Yai, however, is not still popularly used among Thai people except to a certain degree in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. The term 'Pama' remains in any case the all-encompassing category that imperatively collapses the divided identity that prevails inside Burma, as exemplified by a male engineering student from Yangon: 'When I arrived in Chiang Mai, I was so surprised to see so many Burmese living and working here. I was even more shocked to realize that the people we call Thai in Myanmar are called Burmese here'.

The awareness of a reactive Other greatly complicates any of the political aims educated Burmese, especially members of pro-democracy movements, might hold. The lack of unity among different opposition groups as well as among ethnic groups has often been pointed out as a major impediment to successful democratization movements. In the news media of the exiled Burmese, such as the *Irrawaddy* in Chiang Mai and the *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB) in Norway, journalists and political commentators take up the issue on a regular basis with thought-provoking analysis. However, most of my respondents mentioned that until they moved to Thailand they had had no real knowledge of the meaning of 'unity' because they had never directly experienced the labelling of belonging to an ethnic or distinct political collective (apart from being against the junta) with such pronounced boundaries.

Framing Otherness

Many scholars have addressed the issue of Burmese negative representation in Thailand from the perspective of nationalist discourse. The construction of *Khwampenthai*, commonly translated as Thainess, rooted in the late 1930s, began an era of staunch nationalism with Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram. Phibun has already been widely discussed as the source of the widespread acknowledgement of negative feel-

ings towards the Burmese, thanks mostly to the writings of Tongchai Winichakul and Pavin Chachavalpongpun. In Thailand, the Burmese collective identity has attained such an acute level of essentialization that just the naming of the group, regardless of ethnicity, class, education level, purpose or status of migration, takes us back to a limited series of criteria and historical references, which all point to fear and mistrust, and thus, by consequence, to the imperative need to maintain solid boundaries between the 'us' and 'them'. A third-year engineering student in Chiang Mai remarks:

> One of my professors explained to us that Thai people learn to hate the Burmese through the history they learned. How come we do not learn to hate British and the Japanese who invaded and colonized us? We also learn our history in school. There must be other reasons why the Thai do not like us.

Thongchai Winichakul refers to 'negative identification' as a process through which Thai citizens learn from school age to define themselves by identifying what is 'un-Thai'. According to him, an example of negative identification can easily be found in everyday life (1994: 5). On the 'essence' of Thainess, or *Khwampenthai*, Winichakul writes:

> In Thailand today there is a widespread assumption that there is such a thing as a common Thai nature or identity: *khwanpenthai* (Thainess). It is believed to have existed for a long time, and all Thai are supposed to be well aware of its virtue. The essence of Thainess has been well preserved up to the present time despite the fact that Siam has been transformed greatly toward modernization in the past hundred years (1994: 3).

The concept of negative identification was pushed further a few years later by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, in his discussion about *Khwampenthai*, or Thainess, which is, according to him, determined through the construction of evil others, which are represented by the *farang* (Westerners) and the Burmese. He argues that, '…because the prime objective of the negative identification was to identify Thainess, it would not matter whether otherness could be clearly defined, as long as it served as a contradictory subject to Thai nationhood' (2005: 41).

He further demonstrates with great detail that the production of civic nationalistic feelings through the construction of the Burmese villain 'Other' was an effective strategy used by King Chulalongkorn and later by the first prime minister, Phibun, to demonstrate the unwillingness of the Thai to forget their traditional enemy (Chachavalpongpun 2005: 51). Popular films, drama series and novels constantly replay the myth of the historically brutal enemy embodied by the Burmese and the destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767. The myth of the untrustworthy and

violent Burmese continues to shape the perception of the Thai towards the migrants from Burma even though, in fact, conflicts with the Burmese were noteworthy in only three periods over the 400 years of Ayutthaya's history (Peleggi 2007: 194).

Without discarding the value of Tongchai Winichakul and Pavin Chachavalpongpun's insights, I would like to frame the issue in another conceptual framework, one that takes patterns of discrimination as an unavoidable consequence of any nationalist performance and thus moves forward from a nationalistic construction to provide another perspective, one emerging from the subjective experiences of the marginalized. Appadurai reminds us:

> No modern nations, however benign [their] political system and however eloquent [their] public voices may be about the virtues of tolerance, multiculturalism, and inclusion, are free of the idea that its national sovereignty is built on some sort of ethnic genius (2006: 3).

Appadurai's view might at first appear as shockingly straightforward, but his view does indeed strike a chord and incites us to stop relativizing up to the extent that the operativity of state construction becomes blurred and unaccountable. Drawing from Giddens, Ortner (2006: 111) remarks that actors are always at least partially 'knowing subjects', interacting constantly with their environment from the position of the subject, deeply feeling the discrepancy between their imagined collective and the gap between this imagined collective and the unavoidably fragmented image presented to them by others. As the host nation of reference here, we cannot ignore the fact that Thailand has behind it a long history of cultivating feelings of hostility and distrust towards Burman and Burmese people in general. However, strict immigration policies towards refugees and asylum seekers, as I will discuss later, add quite a dramatic touch to the picture, silencing the voices of people who crossed the border, in some cases with the hope of being heard.

According to Appadurai, minority groups are both necessary and unwelcome for the majority (Appadurai 2006: 44). They are desirable because they can fit into a category where they can be useful for the majority, for example, as Burmese domestic helpers and caretakers in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Unskilled labour migrants, who are the majority of people from the Shan state, are known to make an extremely positive contribution to the Thai economy, and this seems to be well acknowledged by the Thai public despite the severe discrimination they are suffering on a daily basis (Yang 2009). They are unwelcome because the boundaries of the minority groups' identities are not so

clearly demarcated, which makes them somehow threatening. This is especially the case with educated migrants, who are difficult to locate in the social hierarchy and whose loyalty and contributions cannot be captured as easily. In that sense, they do fit even more the public image of the historical enemy, a rather convenient representation that serves as a justification for feelings of mistrust and even disgust. The feeling of being systematically looked down upon, of being made responsible for their own political fate, of being considered as enemies and as untrustworthy is acute among the English-educated Burmese.

This boundary is not only one-sided, but also appears almost as strongly among the lowland Burmese migrants' perspective even though the education system in Burma has always targeted the British as the evil other, and not the Thai neighbours. According to their narratives, the awareness of not being welcome in Thailand is fairly strong among the educated Burmese migrants. The refusal to belong is often reaffirmed through the repetitive assertion of being temporary sojourners who should stay as far away as possible from any process that would potentially take them a little closer to being Thai. This does not mean, however, that the possibility of seeing Thailand as their permanent home is totally shunned – it is possible to live in Thailand without becoming Thai. However, gaining citizenship would put them suddenly at the bottom of the social, political and economic hierarchy in a formal way. Stereotypes about Thai nationals are also quite enduring. The most common case mentioned among my respondents is the lack of understanding of Buddhism and immoral, non-religious behaviours, of being too centred on themselves and condescending towards people from the neighbouring countries. On the positive side, the Thai people are described as politically vocal and assertive towards their own leaders.

Not Belonging

Thai citizenship for the Burmese migrants is better than being stateless, as long as the Thai government does not require them to assimilate and forget their own language, culture and political ambitions towards their motherland. However, citizenship is rarely an option due to stringent conditions that can rarely be met by Burmese migrants, so educated Burmese who cannot – or do not want to – go back to their homeland in its current political state see Thailand merely as a stepping stone to a third country or as a temporary shelter. This distinction is triggered by the series of factors listed earlier. And in fact, this distinction helps

to construct a marginal status in a sort of comfort zone in which the refusal to belong is an intrinsic part of this distinction, reminiscent of the exiles' rejection of belonging evoked by Said in his thought-provoking 'Reflections on Exile':

> No matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics who feel their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood. Anyone who is really homeless regards the habit of seeing estrangement in everything modern as an affectation, a display of modish attitudes. Clutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile jealously insists on his or her right to refuse to belong (2000:182).

Unwillingness to belong to the host state is pervasive among all the Burmese I encountered during three years of fieldwork in Thailand, and this unwillingness is not only restricted to Burmese who identified themselves as exiles. However, a good proportion of documented graduate students and scholars have more in common with the exiles than with their friends and family who never left Burma. Their awareness grows as they live in Thailand and interact with pro-democracy political exiles and access the mountain of information available through English-speaking news networks about the political situation back home. The difference is their constant fear of effectively being forced into exile and thus not being able one day to return safely to visit their families and friends. On the other hand, the undocumented exiles are often terrified by the idea of being sent back. In other words, the documented migrants are afraid of having to share the destiny of their co-nationals in exile; however, every important crisis back home is a moment of collective anxiety and suffering through which the boundary between the legal and illegal migrants almost disappears. Thailand, as a nation-state, will never be their 'true' home and there is not much will among the educated Burmese migrants to make the effort of integrating into Thai society. However, it would be misleading to simply assert that the desire not to belong to the Thai Kingdom is a matter of fact for the majority of Burmese migrants. As I will try to demonstrate later, the Thai state, through evasive immigration laws and illusive practices by law enforcement officers has help producing a meta-narrative that conveys the feeling of not belonging.

Subjective experiences therefore shed light on processes that remain completely absent of statistics and demographics. Among these processes are the ones that lead to the refusal to belong in any other way than to occupy temporarily, but at the same time entirely, a space: a neighbourhood, a town, a university faculty. It does not mean, however,

that the attachment to the location is superficial: the community that has been created, the network, and even the cafes that have been over the years monopolized by Burmese students and the intellectual elite in exile, the established Burmese eateries, on campus or few kilometres away, are all places where deep, homey feelings are anchored. Moe Ye Htay (not her real name), a writer in exile since 1996 who has applied for immigration in the US, describes this anchorage through her own experience of belonging and non-belonging:

> Chiang Mai is my home; it is where I live, where I am happy. I have been here for almost 20 years and I cannot even imagine myself going back to live in Burma. I do not feel however that Thailand is my home because I do not have any legal papers and I will never get them from here; Thailand has never really wanted me. They tolerate me as long as I stay polite and silent. My real home is my community, my friends, my students... I am really afraid of leaving, going to the US. Even if I have many friends there, I want to go only to get a passport, so I can come back to Chiang Mai and not be afraid anymore of being deported to Burma.

The subjective experiences of Burmese migrants include, in great part, the process of reassessing their own identity frames of reference. It is especially the case for the Burmese students, a community which includes civil servants sent by the SPDC, individuals who receive scholarships from various organizations including overseas pro-democracy organizations or local Thai universities. The scripts university-educated Burmese are unfolding should be read partly as modes of resistance towards being incorporated into the social hierarchy popularly expressed in Thai media and public discourse. However, being associated with an oppressive majority, the Burman, is a script to which most tend to resist, even more when they are in contact with the oppressed minorities from their homeland. In this context, to be called 'Pama' seems to be less problematic since the negative stereotypes the term is associated with in Thailand do not refer to the Burmese military regime, but allude essentially to the Thai social hierarchy. Even more, 'Pama' includes everyone from Burma without drawing boundaries between ethnic groups. In this sense, it shares some similarities with 'Burmese'. The ambivalence towards accepting or rejecting this Thai construction of Burmeseness does not indicate, however, that this construction is honoured, but rather, that it is public and relatively well defined, and therefore easier to appropriate and act upon. However, the stereotype of being associated with unskilled workers and domestic helpers is often a matter of debate among the educated Burmese migrants: 'I object to being called Pama', indicated a female lecturer in Bangkok during a

focus group. 'Pama means "maid" for the Thai, and I do not like to be identified as such', she continued. A female student and pro-democracy activist, present at the same focus group, disagreed: 'For me, I have no objection to being called Pama. When Thai people ask me where I am from, I tell them I am Pama. However, I also always add, I am a student from (…) University'.

For Abdelmalek Sayad, the equation between migrants and OS (Ouvrier spécialisé – literally, specialized worker, but better translated as unskilled worker) is obvious in the case of the Kabyle in France (2004: 162). Among the Burmese in Thailand, this equation has also found strong resonance and educated migrants feel challenged to the core:

> Every time I say that I am Burmese, people think that I am a domestic worker, Pama or Bama'r signifies 'maid' in the mind of the Thai people. Nobody will ask what I do, they assume all the time that I am there to do their housework. Even at the meditation centre of Sri Chimnoy, a woman told me, after few days of meditation: 'Would you like to clean at my house?' I was so insulted, although she knew very well that Sri Chimnoy, the greatest meditation master, was Burmese!

At a point in the narration of their experience, all my respondents would refer to a situation of isolation, stigmatization, mistrust and ostracism from their Thai classmates and co-workers. All of them, as other Burmese short-term or long-term migrants, sojourners and refugees, are to a large extent left with no other choices but to incorporate these representations in the framing of their daily interaction with Thai people. The negative representations also affect deeply the way they themselves construct their own space and trigger feelings of not belonging. However, in everyday life, many of my respondents try to strategically avoid facing prejudices by hiding their national identity. In this context, a female NGO staff member mentions, 'When a taxi driver asks me where I am from, I do not say I am Burmese. Usually, I simply do not answer, or if he insists I will say I am from the Philippines.'

As for any migrant, individual experiences of the collective for the Burmese in Thailand are lived simultaneously in two separate worlds representing two locations that can likely be called home: the rejection of Thailand as a home does not mean that the town or the city of residence cannot be considered as such. The 'home' in this case is contained in a number of streets, a neighbourhood with its Burmese coffee shops and food stalls, as is the case in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, or a whole town such as Mae Sot. In constructing their identity the migrants and sojourners move between power structures and between images of

themselves constructed through these same structures. This dialectic is especially noticeable between the images of victim, which shape Burmeseness in transnational solidarity movements and as historical villain, which continues to dominate in Thai popular discourse. On 27 September 2007, *The Nation's* editorial 'Cut all support to evil regime' pleads for more humanitarian assistance to Burmese refugees fleeing the violent crackdown following the Saffron Revolution. In response, a Burmese scientist living in the outskirts of Bangkok begins her letter as follows: 'Firstly of all I would like to plead to the editors of *The Nation* and also Thai citizens, please don't prepare to welcome the refugees. Just help us to be able to go home'.[10] The writer never sent the letter for fear of reprisal, afraid even to use a pseudonym. As is the case with many Burmese academic professionals and students living in Thailand, she never actively engaged in political activities, choosing to suffer in silence because of the real fear of putting her family back in Yangon in danger, being arrested herself when she goes on her bi-yearly visits, or being expelled from Thailand.[11] Fear and mistrust are profound, being part of the experience of most, if not all, Burmese living in Thailand, whatever their political stance.

Victimhood: Reaching Out to the National Other

After the cyclone Nargis devastated the lowland regions of Burma, killing more than 140,000 people, a fairly large number of students and other educated Burmese living in Chiang Mai and Bangkok got involved in support groups to help the victims of the cyclone and collect donations. As such activities were highly controlled and monopolized by the Burmese government, many Burmese volunteers in Thailand faced the danger of being repatriated. They had to operate in the dark, with very few resources but networks and contacts inside their homeland, to whom they would channel money and goods. In many instances they had to hide their activities from their own employer or university for fear of reprisal, unless they would agree to channel the funding through official, but very unreliable channels. During the Saffron Revolution of 2007, very few students went to demonstrate against the brutality of the Burmese junta. In addition, pro-democracy students in Bangkok went into hiding in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. Other students were brave enough to demonstrate in front of the Burmese Embassy; however, they had to hide their faces in front of cameras for fear of being recognized by their own teachers or untrustworthy classmates.

   In Burma, the SPDC uses various means to extend its power outside its borders, including making those who are left behind responsible for their kins' political activities abroad. Naturalization is not an option for most migrants and newcomers in Thailand, and thus, the right to equality is impossible. For the educated Burmese in Thailand, integration is also not an issue, at least not a priority, or even a desire. The right to have a voice without having to belong sounds *a priori* contradictory, however, this right is ultimately the only one that could truly make sense to a large proportion of educated Burmese in Thailand. In these periods of tremendous insecurity, patterns of division and diverging views emerge together with a new frame of identification, which implies collective suffering and victimhood. The victim signifies, according to Wieviorka, the public recognition of the suffering lived by a person or a group (2005: 100), thus inferring the subjectification of the collective. The victim defines herself or himself through that which she or he was deprived, through suffering and loss (2005: 104). It is through their personal narrative that victims find a voice. For the pro-democracy activist Burmese, most of whom are considered ethnic Burman, loss represents deprivation of individual freedom and is constructed on the basis of human rights principles, while for the Shan, this deprivation is translated primarily in terms of the infringement of collective rights based on ethnicity and indigeneity. Michel Wieviorka argued that the victims who express themselves through collective identity – which he refers to as *victimes collectives* (collective victims) - have not necessarily been touched personally by mass massacres and other barbarian acts, but are deeply affected because they belong to a group, a community that has been, at any point of time, the object of acts of extreme violence that have completely destroyed their own historical markers (*repères*), culture and daily life (2005: 91). The emergence of the victim signifies, according to Wieviorka, the public recognition of the suffering lived by a person or a group (2005: 100). He contends that victimhood proves to be a powerful mode of identification through which individuals express their grievance on an international platform while reclaiming the status of subject, which violence has dramatically taken away from them.

   Violence does not imply only physical violence. Structural violence, which is mainly translated by poverty, disempowerment, emotional violence and silencing, affects virtually all aspects of human life. The collective identity of 'victim' is specifically suitable for the pro-democracy Burmese who largely design their political aspirations in terms of national unity implying that 'we ultimately all suffer the same fate, at

the mercy of the same brutal government'. The reorganization of the self for the educated Burmese in Thailand has to include the processing of images of collective suffering, especially the images referring to key events and uprisings which have each time incited a large number of people seeking refuge in Thailand. References to structural violence back home notably occupy a place next to the violent crackdowns of 8-8-88 and the 2007 Saffron Revolution and open the possibility for victims to join the community of victims. For the documented students I met, the drive to identify as a victim can be extremely powerful to the point of shaping everyday interactions. In this context, victimhood helps them to be recognized as acting subjects; they are duly aware that the sharing and appropriation of narratives of collective suffering are effective ways, on one hand, to foster a sense of belonging to a cause, which they come to see as theirs, and on the other hand, to trigger respect among the Thai and other non-Burmese in their immediate surroundings.

The politics of immigration in Thailand has helped to produce this new form of identification through notoriously ambiguous legislation. Thailand has not signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, therefore all persons entering the Kingdom without permission are considered illegal migrants (Huguet and Punpuing 2005; Rajah 2001). Thailand, according to the Documentation for Action Groups in Asia (DAGA), applies a very narrow definition of refugees 'as persons fleeing armed conflict rather than abiding by the broader and internationally accepted definition of persecution in their home country' (DAGA 2005: 19). Under these conditions, asylum seekers and illegal labour migrants are equally under the threat of being deported at any time unless they apply to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be recognized as 'persons of concern' and therefore eligible to be relocated in a third country. For this condition to apply, however, they must resettle in one of the 'temporary displaced persons' camps located at the border with Burma and wait for their fate to be decided. Many people have already spent years in these camps in extremely precarious conditions. However, in 1999, after radical demonstrations in front of the UNHCR by student resettlement seekers, the Thai government subsequently closed the Maneeloy camp, the only refugee camp for students and political activists. With the closing of the Maneeloy camp, the tertiary educated who flee the country because of fear of persecution have been stripped of the only protection they had of not being sent back to Burma.[12] The camp was kept in miserable conditions and the students suffered constant harassment

from the camp authorities, the police and the residents of Ratchaburi, the town where the camp was located. Some political dissidents have condemned the radical movements led by the student refugees, arguing that the standoff has eroded the reputation of the asylum seekers and created mistrust among the Thai.

The ambivalence of the immigration laws and the constant fear of being deported create a social climate that is absolutely not conducive for dialogue and openness, thus preventing Burmese migrants from engaging in open discussion that could potentially lead to a better understanding of their condition among the Thai public. This is accentuated by the common belief that institutions attended by large numbers of Burmese are infiltrated by spies or simply righteous SPDC supporters. Victimhood is strengthened by that permanent state of insecurity and mistrust in an environment devoid of any legal protection.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined a set of perspectives on identity and feelings of belonging among educated Burmese who have been living in Thailand. As I tried to demonstrate, educated Burmese migrants come from vastly different backgrounds and ideologies. They are not a unified community, but nevertheless do have greater opportunities to get to know and learn from each other compared to the limited opportunities they have in practice to do the same with Thai co-workers or classmates. In Thailand, Burmese migrants are confronted with different models of self-identification: the model that has shaped them from their childhood to the university years, the model defined by the Thai state and popular discourse, and the one that is continuously produced through their daily experiences in Thailand.

The feeling of belonging among migrants has in my view much to do with the liberty to choose an environment where self-identity processes are in line with the identity frameworks proposed in the land of adoption and where the dialectic between self and other does not appear as a challenge in everyday life. In Thailand, Otherness has been created through the state apparatus with the aim of instigating feelings of belonging among its own citizens, not only towards the state, but towards the nation, the specific central Thai culture, and a specific language and religion. All of these elements have been politically and socially embodied in the concept of Thainess or *Kwampenthai*. The Other in Thailand is thus constructed as originating from outside the boundaries of the state,

and it is specifically the incursion of this Other inside the Thai territory that is considered threatening for many Thai. In this context, minorities in Thailand tend to be perceived as temporary migrants, even if their history has been unfolding inside the geographical boundaries of the country for generations. In Burma, on the other hand, the construction of Otherness has followed a largely different pattern. In the case of Burma, the Other is represented not so much by outsiders, but by ethnic minorities who are expected to belong since their land of origin before independence was already located inside the boundaries of what now constitutes Burma, but have been resisting the state project of unification and Burmanization, and more recently, of Myanmarization. In Burma, thus, Others are represented by the ethnic minorities from the frontier states, which include the Shan, the Karen, the Kayen, the Kachin, and the Mon, among others. Interestingly, however, multi-ethnicity is part of the official construction of Burmeseness. Otherness has been created by the Burmese state based on its own design of multi-ethnicity. Burmeseness in other words is, in its own essence, a highly fragmented frame of identity, even if we take into consideration the momentary alliances and agreements at different points in time and between the different groups. It is important as well to mention that the Burmese junta points directly to the former colonial power, the British, as well as other outsiders, mostly Westerners, as representing the evil Others. However, in my perspective, this construction does not leave a strong imprint among educated Burmese in Thailand, especially among pro-democracy activists who have found their strongest support among Westerners generally.

Feelings of belonging and not belonging are intrinsically linked to a collection of subjective experiences about identity before and after migration, experiences that define where the migrants locate themselves in the world. These experiences are not limited to nationality, ethnicity or class modes of identification, all of which bear different meanings and attributes according to context. In this respect, the politics of naming can be extremely confusing for the individuals who never had the opportunity to question who they were before changing their environments. Being Burmese in Thailand does not mean the same as being Burmese in Burma. One of the ways to escape the conflicting constructions presented as operative in different contexts is to engage the self in an identity framework that borrows characteristics that transcend political and cultural geographies and at the same time produces alternative ways of engaging the collective. Many Burmese youth in Thai

universities start identifying with images of the suffering of the Burmese displayed in the media, which gives them the opportunity to appropriate these images in a backward motion. They listen to the news in English from exile media, interact regularly and listen to the political exiles - in some cases they are taught by them. They learn to relocate themselves in a transnational environment where their own subjective experiences are always taken into account. The image of the victim helps them to display their shared values with sometimes great motivation and fresh insights without falling into essentialist representations of who they are supposed to be. Victimhood takes them back to their own Burmeseness by adding dignity to their otherwise shattered voices.

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NOTES

1 This is a fictitious name. Most of the respondents in this article have been given fictitious names at their request, to remain anonymous.

2 The name of the state was officially changed from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). However, the name 'Myanmar' is not recognized by some Western governments nor by any pro-democracy Burmese activists. In the international arena, both Myanmar and Burma are officially recognized. My own choice of using Burma (unless in a citation) in this paper is essentially because it was most commonly used by the Burmese migrants in Thailand involved in this research as well as by the Thai when they speak in English. It is also the term favoured by the English language newspapers in Bangkok such as *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post*. However, the younger generation of Burmese migrants, especially students, often use 'Myanmar' even when they are very vocal against the military regime ruling their homeland. Thus, both terms remain extremely divisive but the term Burma appeared to be generally less problematic among the Burmese I met in Thailand. The name of the former capital Rangoon was also changed, to Yangon, in 1989. Here I use Yangon, which I found more commonly used among my respondents.

3 The *Irrawaddy* is a news magazine conceived by Burmese political exiles and based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

4 The term 'urban migrants' is also commonly used (see for example, Taylor 2009). However, I prefer the term 'English-educated migrants' because 'urban migrants' refers mainly to political exiles and has been used widely in the context of student political dissidents fleeing to Thailand in the 1990s.

5 A large number of political exiles arrived in Thailand during the years following the event now known as 8-8-88, which refers to a bloody crackdown by the military on protests led on 8 August 1988 by university students against the then one-party system. The crackdown resulted in the death of more than 3,000 people, mostly university students, and the military coup that put the SLORC in power. Subsequently,

the political exiles continued their political activities under the banner of organiza-tions such as the All Myanmar Student's Democratic Front (ABSDF), the National Council of the Union of Myanmar (NCUB), and the National League for Democracy (Liberate Area). For a detailed analysis of Burmese pro-democracy activists abroad see Zaw Oo (2006).

6 SPDC refers to the State Peace and Development Council, the name of the Myanmar military government since 1997. SPDC replaced SLORC, which stands for State Law and Order Restoration Council. The change of name coincided with an administra-tive reorganization of the military structure.

7 In the introduction of her book *Living Silence in Myanmar*, Christina Fink notes, 'Some ethnic nationalist leaders worry that a democratic government would not safeguard minority rights. At the same time, some Burman pro-democracy activists are uncomfortable with the ethnic nationals' demands for autonomy, which they perceive as potentially leading to the break-up of the country. In recent years many of the opposition groups have to see the creation of a federal, democratic union as the best solution for all, but the regime's divide-and-rule tactics have made it dif-ficult for them to work together' (2009: 3).

8 Interview conducted in Chiang Mai, 20 August 2009.

9 The Saffron Revolution is the name that was given to the anti-government protests that took place between 18 and 30 September 2007 simultaneously in many cities of the country. The demonstrations ended following a series of brutal military crackdowns. Saffron is associated with the colour of the robes of the thousands of Buddhist monks who were leading the protests.

10 *The Nation* is one of the two major English language daily newspapers in Thailand. The other one is the *Bangkok Post*.

11 The author is the one I refer to as Yin Soe, whom I quote at the beginning of this article. I thank her deeply for letting me quote this letter.

12 By December 1999, 2,905 students had registered and entered Maneeloy (Caouette and Pack 2002: 11).

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