

Internet Centers/Usage by Burmese Ethnic Migrants in Mae Sod: Traversing the Borders of Internet Divide and Recasting Ethnic Identities

By Nikos Dacanay

Abstract - This paper, taken from an on-going research on the use of Internet centers by marginalized women in the Thai-Burma border, reflects upon the various means of appropriation of the technology. The Internet has ostensibly liberating effects on these women, but this paper proposes that there is more to the feeling of being free in the virtual world. There is currently a “project” of affirming, claiming, and molding traditional ethnic identities through the use of Internet. The paper imagines this as revolutionizing the discursive mode of resistance and rebellion by these marginalized women against the military regime in Burma. Using their agentic qualities, the women transform their social scripts as “marginalized” and “displaced” into “empowered” women who are informed, educated, and aware of their human rights. Set in the border town of Mae Sod in Tak province Thailand and against the backdrop of an omnipresent – but mute – population of illegal migrants from Burma, the discursive inferior-superior relationship between Thais and Burmese, and the complex networking of bodies and organizations providing humanitarian and development aid in the border, this paper looks at the symbiotic relationship between the use of the Internet and the re/construction of ethnic identities. The paper argues that the incomplete and on-going self-making ethnic identity project shapes how Internet is used as much as how Internet is also shaping this identity project (i.e. construction of virtual identities, appropriation of modern identities, repairing ethnic identities, etc.)

Index terms – Burmese identity, displaced, empowerment, marginalized

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Nikos Dacanay is Coordinator for Research, Publication, and Documentation of WEAVE.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper confesses to be a contemplation on the preliminary data that my research team has gathered for a research project that we are doing which looks at Internet centers and empowerment of marginalized women in the Thai-Burma border. The research uses the concept of

empowerment from development discourse. It attempts to find out whether the use of and access to Internet/Internet centers relate to political, economic, social, and cultural empowerment.

This paper however focuses on identity politics, a theme that has resonated heavily from the data that we have gathered. It focuses on the self-making project (Ortner, 1996) of marginalized women. This concept – which loosely translates to the idea that the ontological self is never ever complete but is always in the process of completion as the individual defines and redefines itself in the social world – became useful in framing the stories of the different women we have interviewed.

There has been an abundance of literature on the political and social impacts of the Internet. Studies have shown how the Internet has provided liberating effects especially on individuals in conflict-situated areas (Perterra et al 2003). Indeed, what became clear from our data was the importance of the Internet in providing a space or refuge to migrant women who are displaced because of the political situation in Burma and who now live in a quasi-hospitable and quasi hostile and restricting environment in Thai towns by the border. While the movements of their bodies are restricted their minds are free to explore and travel to far away places through the Internet. The Internet becomes a window to the outside world, so to speak. However, this idea essentially only looks at the effects of Internet use. What was also obvious from the stories of the women was their active agency in utilizing and making full use of the Internet to adapt to their ways of life. A two-way process of change can therefore be imagined whereby the use of the Internet has led to many things (one of which is providing a shelter from their subjective positions) and at the same time women adopt the Internet to their everyday life and use it to perform their ethnic identities. A look into how women access and use the Internet, the websites they visit, the people with whom they email or chat often with, and the topics and themes of their emails and online chats reveals a lot about how the Internet is changing migrant women and becoming an integral part in the performance of their ethnic identity as

well as how being Burmese ethnic shapes the use of the Internet (after Miller and Slater, 2000).

I treat identity in this paper as a project, following the idea of Cannell (1999, p. 247) about identity as “doing who they are” through the making and remaking of transformative relationship with others. In the social sciences, identity is seen not as an essential aspect of a group of people but as constituting “cultural performance” in the process of objectification, identification, and embodiment (Johnson 1997, p. 19). In this view, I look at the project of the self as being performed and taking place through a series of fields and locations in a dialectical fashion. The self-making project brings to bear the agentic quality of migrant women’s subjectivities. Identity is a project that is continuously interrogated as migrant women grapple with their social and economic conditions, fight the military regime in Burma, relate with the Thais in Mae Sod, and work with the different human rights groups and other NGOs providing humanitarian and development assistance.

On the other hand, I view empowerment as both a process and an outcome (after Amartya Sen) in which women experience as well as challenge and subvert power relationships. This subversion takes place in institutional, material, and discursive contexts (Rai 2007: 2).

Methodology. While the research has interviewed several dozens of women - both migrants and refugees - from different community based organizations (CBOs) and different ethnic groups, for the purpose of this paper it will only concentrate on migrant women from the Burma Women’s Union (BWU) and will look at two case studies. In depth interviews were conducted with 27 women from different CBOs and five focused group discussions and participation observation were also conducted.

II. BURMESE MIGRANTS IN MAE SOD

The migration to Mae Sod by ethnic groups from Burma has its roots from a long history of diasporic movements of ethnic minorities to Thailand. Soon after Burma’s independence from Britain in 1948, the country went through a prolonged political crisis with several insurgencies being launched by the ethnic groups. While the distrust between ethnic groups and the Burman has been in existence for centuries, it flared into outright rebellion when the British left and the ethnic groups did not get the autonomy they had been seeking for. The Karen people started what is now considered to be the world’s longest insurgency, and other groups such as Karennis, Kachins, Mons, and Shans also went into rebellion. The number of migrants in Mae Sod has since risen and most of the new entrants cross mainly for employment opportunities. There are currently

100 thousand total migrant workers in Mae Sod¹ who are predominantly Burman, Karen, and Karenni in ethnicity. Originally farmers and salaried professionals in Burma, they are predominantly illegal workers (those who are legal have annual renewable work permits) and belong to the lower income group (employed as cooks, restaurant/store attendants, housemaids, construction workers, factory workers, etc).

In Mae Sod, their illegal status constricts their movement. For factory workers, they sleep inside or beside the factories that they work for. For others, they live with their employers and are seldom allowed to have rest days. Most of the migrants live in the northern part of the town where most of the factories are located.

A growing number of development assistance on the border has changed the landscape of Mae Sod starting in the 1990s. Several migrant women put up community based organizations (CBOs) and were introduced to the discourse of development work and human rights by non government organizations (NGOs). These CBOs can be seen as products of the various trainings, seminars, workshops, meetings, etc. by these NGOs.

III. BURMA WOMEN’S UNION

One of the CBOs in Mae Sod is the Burma Women’s Union (BWU) which was established in 1995 by a group of young female students who left Burma and crossed the border to Thailand after the military’s brutal crack-down on the popular uprising. BWU advocates on increasing women’s participation in the Burmese political arena and providing much-needed support for women in the refugee camps along the borders of Burma. Because of networks with other women organizations, BWU espouses human rights discourse and inculcates this discourse among its members. Membership with BWU is open to all women of Burma regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, marital status, sexual preference, or livelihood. It gives social welfare needs to its members and provides short-term educational and vocational training programs for women. It also sends its representatives to regional and international forums and conferences to highlight the situation of women in Burma as well as to gain international advocacy skills and establish a network of international and regional women’s organizations.

I present two case studies of women from BWU to showcase how access to and use of Internet has changed these women and how their ethnic identities shape the use of the Internet.

¹ http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15194. There are currently close to 1.5 million legal and illegal migrant workers from Burma in Thailand.

A. "Suh Nii"

Suh Nii who is a Mon (ethnic group) was born in the Mon state of Burma to a family of farmers. She grew up helping her father and siblings sell vegetables in the market. When she started going to school, her boyish attributes made her the center of jokes among her fellow classmates. Because of this, she quit school at the age of 13. When she was 15 years old, she crossed the border to Thailand to follow her sister who was working in Bangkok. With the aid of the employer of her sister who bribed the Thai military that patrolled the border, she was able to go to Mae Sod initially, and finally to Bangkok. She took on many menial jobs such as laundry worker, factory worker, domestic helper, and dishwasher. She suffered abuses from her employers and her sister helped her return to Burma after three years. In Burma, Suh Nii worked in a factory and got embroiled in a workers' protest movement after the factory refused to pay them their salaries. It was through her involvement in the protest that she met people from BWU who told her she could work for the organization. She returned to Mae Sod in 2006 to start her internship at BWU which included how to use the computer and the Internet as well as trainings and seminars on women's rights, gender, sexuality, and politics in Burma.

Suh Nii used to visit the Internet shop beside the BWU office when she was still an intern as there was limited access to Internet at the BWU office. Today, however she says that she seldom visits the Internet shop since the shop owner who is Thai does not seem to be friendly with her and the other Burmese from BWU.

Suh Nii uses the Internet mainly to check her email and also check Burmese websites for news on Burma. She visits "Burma Today" which is the "mother" of all Burmese websites and which has links to other sites, blogs, and audio and picture files. While she has registered to online social networking sites, she seldom uses them.

Suh Nii had an online girlfriend who is Karen (ethnic group) and who was formerly an intern at BWU until she was resettled to Australia. She said she used to chat with her girlfriend everyday for two to three hours to talk about how they missed each other, what life was like in Australia, and the situation in Mae Sod and inside Burma. They would pray together in chat.

It was also through BWU that she met a gay and lesbian human rights group called HREIB². She attended several workshops and seminars by HREIB and learned so many things about gender and sexual rights. She uses the Internet to spread articles about lesbianism to friends she has met in

the workshops and seminars. She also reads about how lesbians from other parts of the world live their lives. She met many women who are like her on the Internet. All of these activities have made her more informed and knowledgeable and proud of being a lesbian.

I like the Internet because I can easily get information about the situation in Burma in a minute. I can share the information with other people. Information exchange is very fast. I learn a lot of things too through the Internet. I read many things about gay and lesbian life in other countries, the situation of gays and lesbians inside Burma, human rights, politics, etc. I learned that in Japan, for example, there is a congresswoman who is a lesbian and in other parts of the world like Nepal and India there are lesbian political leaders. I also use the Internet to meet lesbian friends in Skype and other websites.

I used to have a girlfriend. Let's call her Kay Tweh. We met each other when we were doing internship at BWU³. She has now resettled in Australia; she went there last October 2007. We emailed each other everyday and chatted all the time. We talked about ordinary things like "How are you... I miss you... what are you eating... what are you wearing... where are you going... etc." She told me that life in Australia is very different from life here in the border. It's very cold and lonely. She said people look down on her because she's Asian. She also lives separately from her parents who were resettled in the US and not in Australia. I would give her comforting words. I would tell her that she should not lose hope and should find solutions to her problems. I would tell her to pray to God and that I would do the same for her. I told her we would meet each other someday.

In 2009 she got married and everything changed. She tried to explain to me her situation and I tried to understand her, but I was very hurt. We stopped talking to each other. Today I have a new girlfriend. She works in a factory and lives inside the factory place. She doesn't know how to use the Internet so I call her through her cellphone.

B. Ying

Ying, a mixed Karen and Burman, is a 24-year old staff member of BWU. She comes from a political family that is known to be critical of SPDC regime in Burma. Her family is now based in Mae Sod and Australia.

² HREIB = Human Rights Education Institute of Burma

³ BWU = Burma Women's Union

Ying and her family entered Thailand as refugees and lived in the refugee camp for several years. Because of this, they have a UN ID and can be resettled to third country if they wish to. Her father now works for Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sod helping the sick, and her mother passed away while they were in the camp. Her older brother has resettled to Australia courtesy of the UNHCR resettlement program for refugees, and her younger brother is working for another CBO in Mae Sod.

Ying also wants to go to the third country like her older brother and sees the western countries as a place of opportunities and where her dreams can come true. However, as Karen, she is obliged to take care of her father who unfortunately does not want to be resettled and wants to serve the Karen people who are migrants in Mae Sod.

Ying uses the Internet to talk to her brother in Australia. When she misses her older brother who is now in Australia, she goes to YouTube and listens to Karen traditional songs. She forwards the links to some of these songs to her friends who have already resettled in Canada, Australia, and USA. She said she does this so that they won't forget Karen music and language. She heavily relies on the Internet for work such as the email and getting information about the current situation inside Burma from the various Burmese news websites that are all inter-linked. The Internet has also allowed her to maintain her closeness to her older brother and also to exercise her authority over her younger brother when she reprimands him via email.

I regularly check Burmese websites like BBC, VOA, DVB⁴, Burma Today, burmaclassic.com, democraticforumburma.org, etc. These websites are connected to each other through links and they are in Burmese language and scripts. BBC has radio and I listen to it. These websites also have links to other websites and blogs which I also check. Most of these websites discuss the political situation in Burma, the news about the abuses of the SPDC to the ethnic people, the situation of the ethnic people, the activities of the political and human rights groups in Thailand and other countries, etc. Some also feature the activities of Karen people who have now been relocated to third countries. Others write about their opinions and views on politics and what will happen to Karen people and culture in the future.

The Internet is so important for my work. Because I work for an organization which does political advocacy and we are always doing activities with other NGOs, it's important that we are aware of the current events related to Burma, the SPDC activities,

the movement against SPDC, and even other news around the world. This is why I'm interested in what's happening in Burma and other countries. If I know more I can share in the discussion on politics among my friends. I can also share the news to my friends. Before the internet we had to rely on radio and television. Now even radio and television are on the internet.

I can get all the information I want from the internet. It's also important for our situation right now. We are migrants in Mae Sot and we need intensive networking with other groups not just in Mae Sot but inside Burma and outside Thailand. The internet allows us to do this.

I only glance at the news and read the headlines. I want the sites to be open in my computer. It makes me feel that information about Burma and Karen is readily available for me. I usually go to Google to read world news, research about a country, and also about opinions of people about the situation in Burma.

I meet new friends on the internet. They would introduce themselves by email or through chat. I would ask them where they got my email address and they would say they got it from my friends. Most of those who want to get to know me are girls, although there are some boys as well. They would interrupt me while I am at work so sometimes I ignore them. I chat with them only after work. They're also illegal migrants in Thailand and most live in Mae Hong Son province. They would ask me about the situation in Mae Sot. I tell them about the conditions of Burmese migrants in factories and the security problems. They also tell me their problems. They say Mae Hong Son is a nice place but they also experience problems with security and they have to keep a low profile and not go out often.

From the narratives above, we see how Internet plays a crucial role in the lives of the migrants in Mae Sod. While physically bounded by space and restricted in movement, the Internet allows for the migrants a freer space, mobility, and even security in voicing their political opinion in cyberspace. It has allowed for the expansion of social networks beyond their restrictive and patrolled movements. The Internet has also shaped their identity/ies. For the case of Suh Nii, the Internet becomes essential in performing a lesbian identity as being a cool lesbian is accrued with certain requirements such as having many networks and being computer and Internet literate. From the Internet, Suh Nii gets information about lesbian identity including the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) advocacy and the stories of lesbians from other parts of the world. The Internet enables her to accept and be proud of her sexual

⁴ BBC = British Broadcasting Corporation; VOA = Voice of Asia; DVB = Democratic Voice of Burma

identity. Being Karen or Mon is also now synonymous to being educated and highly informed. Ever since the ethnic groups started the insurgency against the SPDC, their diasporic and displaced conditions required them to be connected to each other and to be well informed about current events and activities of political groups. As Karens and Mons, they are required to be knowledgeable about their ethnic history and the abuses of Burmese military. The knowledge and information available on the Internet allow Karens and Mons to fulfill this identity.

On the other hand, the migrant women are active agents in utilizing the Internet to adapt to their everyday life. Since most of the work of Suh Nii and Ying is communication and relates to networking with other CBOs and NGOs in doing political advocacy, the multimedia communication that Internet provides allows them to do their work efficiently and effectively. Indeed, the political struggle of the ethnic groups has shifted battlefield from the border to cyberspace and the growing community of ethnic groups from Burma scattered around the globe as well as their supporters are connected in a complex cyber network. Migrants are able to adjust to this new battlefield easily and maximize their access of the Internet to create bigger networks of ethnic groups that are resisting SPDC. In fact, most of their use of the Internet relates to their work which is mainly political advocacy and networking with other political groups. The migrants also use the Internet to repair allegiance to their ethnic identities by performing cultural values pertaining to father-daughter relationship or sibling relationship.

IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

As Burmese ethnic migrants are placed within a complex framework of gendered and racialized economics and politics, their locations necessitate a continuous internalization and transformation of their identities from positions of ethnic "other" in Mae Sod, ethnic non-Burmese, illegal migrants, displaced and marginalized to one that is "empowered" by information and knowledge of their rights as women and as human beings. These contestations are practiced and resolved in the use of Internet. The women participate in the massive network of politically conscious Burmese ethnic from various locations sharing news about their different situations, strengthening their ethnic communities online, spreading their music and language, and repairing cultural values of kinship ties and familial relationships that have been strained because of their subjectivities.

These initial findings and theoretical musings eventually offer more questions than concrete answers and conclusions. In making sense of the stories of the migrant women and how they access the Internet centers or use the Internet, many more questions emerge. But this paper's preliminary

observation takes the case that while the use of the Internet is now integral in being ethnic Burmese, the subjectivities of being ethnic Burmese are also integral in understanding how Internet is used in Mae Sod.

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