

**Military settlement, (im)mobility and nostalgia — Ethnographic research about
Life trajectory and identities of Chinese Diasporas living in Northern Thailand**

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September 2023



Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all my interviewees for their participation, to Yiran for being a great companion during my first visit to Mae Salong in 2022, to my supervisor Dr Huon Wardle for his great intellectual support and to Dr Cassice Last and Ms Maddy Haywood for their great help and to the Laidlaw foundation for their financial support.

Introduction

'Anthropologists have been actively studying borders and borderlands, not only because many borderlands have been neglected in research, but also because they are where anthropologists find concentrated marginalised groups (such as refugees) and minorities, intriguing cross-border state relations and human interactions and mixed and blurred identities' (Chan & Womack 2019: 95). This ethnographic report studies the life stories of Chinese diasporas living at the Thailand-Myanmar border. It studies how Chinese diasporas establish their community at the border, and how the concept of border explains their life stories, how local populations have been impacted by the socio-economic changes surrounding it and how local people perceive their identity and potential intergenerational conflicts in the region. In the first part of this report, I briefly present essential background knowledge about the village that includes the causes of people moving to this village and how the Cold War pushed them to be stateless. It also introduces the ethnicity and basic socio-economic profile of the local residents. The second part of this essay analyses the process by which this local village has been created and how the military hierarchy has impacted on this process. The third part of this essay analyses how the concept of border and its performativity reshapes local residents' national identity. The border policies play a significant role in redefining the spatial borderland at the Thailand-Myanmar Border. This part is supported by Wen-Chin Chang's (2014) work on Chinese migrants living in Myanmar. The last part of this essay references the theory of translocality to explain how local people have been attached with their Chinese identity and how this has been reshaped through the socio-economic changes in Asia.

Background

Doi Mae Salong, my field site, is located in northern Thailand, about 10 km from the Thai-Burmese border. Local residents are mainly Yunnanese Chinese, local Akha people and Burmese. After the second world war and Chinese Civil War, China was taken over by the communist government in 1949, so many Yunnanese refugees decided to leave China and enter Burma, they initially moved into the mountain areas of Shan and Kachin States because they did not have the permission of Burmese government to reside in the country (Chang 2014). Refugees has been a corps from the Nationalist (KMT) army and local self-defence guards. Many of them organised

themselves into KMT guerrilla forces at the border area (Chang 2001: Young 1970). The guerrilla forces temporarily stayed in highland Burma and attempted to establish contact with the KMT government in Taiwan and looked for opportunities to overthrow communist rule in Yunnan and go back to China with the support of the KMT government and the US. However, at the time, Burmese government was unsatisfied about this group of guerrilla forces given its propensity to cause warfare at the Sino-Burmese border and potential military alliances between the KMT forces and other minorities in Highland Burma (Chang 2001). As a result, the majority of the guerilla army was dismissed, with only a small proportion of about 4,700 people allowed to enter Thailand settling at the Thai-Burmese border (9-10). The biggest settlement village named Mae Salong. However, at this time, according to the oral history of local residents, people did not have any legal documents to stay in Thailand. Since the 1970s, the head of the guerilla army has reached agreements with the Thai government. The Thai government asked the KMT forces to help suppress the Communists inside its country. The leader of the KMT forces accepted this proposal and defeated the Communist in Thailand which helped them receive legal citizenship of Thailand (Chang 2001).

Military Hierarchy and (re)settlement

Since the first time I visited the village, I have felt that its military hierarchy plays an important role in reshaping people's daily life. In public spaces such as schools, residents wear clothes that have the symbol of KMT on them. In the centre of the school, there is a huge statue of general Li, the leader of the KMT army in Yunnan at the time. In commercial terms, local goods such as teas and local services such as restaurants and hostels always use '93 division' as the label of their shops or products to illustrate that the product is a legacy of military dominance. At the time of the settlement of the refugee in Thailand, when the village was being created, it had been largely impacted on the hierarchy in the army. One of my respondents, Ming, told me that, ever since the refugees came to Thailand, the local community has been organised according to the military rules. Ming told me that the geographical term Mae Salong actually not only refers to this village, but also to the mountain region at the border. Mae Salong nai refers to the region up in the mountain, and Mae Salong nor refers to the village cluster on the plain surrounding the hill. *Nai* means inside while

nor means outside Ming also told me that when refugees moved to this mountain (refers to Map 1). It was usually non-Yunnanese refugees (mainly Akha people) or injured soldiers who lived on the plains. According to the Map 1, diasporas entered Thailand from the border and some of them built the Akha village on the plain. The rest of them go to the Mae Salong nai region by the 'hiking entrance'. People with higher fighting capabilities were able to move to the mountain, to the Mae Salong nai region. This led to different economic structure and cultural practices in Mae Salong *nai* and Mae Salong *nor*. In terms of economic structure, at the time, villages on the upper hill had been planting poppy and the villages that surrounded were mainly planting rice. Bo, one of Ming's friends, who has been working on tombs designing and organising funerals for 30 years, explained that the Akha people, who live at the foot of the mountain, have special funeral practices. After someone dies, their family needs to bring everything that has been used by this person to the top of the mountain and throw them off the mountain. However, for his customers who live on the mountain, they didn't have any such request.



Map 1:

If we take a closer look at the population distribution of Mae Salong nai, it is also a legacy of military resettlement. Ming told me that when the refugees first came to Mae Salong (*nai*), top members of the army had the priority to choose where they live. They usually chose locations that were on the top of the mountain near the river. I was shocked by this decision. Ming kept explaining, 'the reason they chose to live near the river is purely a military decision, they believed that water is the most important resource, to control the river means to control the region'. Moreover, by staying on the hill, people are able to see all the villages like a watchtower. Others in the refugee

cluster created this upstream village of Mae Salong. However, the socio-economic changes reshaped this advantage. During the time when no war was going on, people who lived at Mae Salong nai needed to exchange for living. They were forced to go up the mountain looking for water and go down the hill to Mae Salong nor to exchange agricultural goods. As the time goes on, a road has been built around this village as needed by economic actions which enables people to have shops around the road for making profits. The rising number of economic activities has improved the living conditions of residents of Mae Salong village. As time has gone on, the former military leaders have realised that their previous choice of living locations was not beneficial for them, so they have decided to occupy or take over some of the locations around the road toward starting their own business. Therefore, the process of settlement and resettlement of refugees can be seen as a legacy of military rule. People in the army or people capable of fighting are allowed to live in Mae Salong nai which is the centre of the military communities, the distribution of locations to live at the village Mae Salong nai is also based on military hierarchy. Military rules have precedence in distributing and redistributing lands, although the military grouping made wrong strategic choices when choosing lands, they still get to redistribute lands in their own economic interest.

Borders and nostalgia

After discussing how the community has been created, it is important to define how the border impacted on local people's identity and mobility. In the cases of Mae Salong, borders have a twofold meaning. On one hand, the border refers to the border between sovereign states. Since the time they were forced to leave Burma and enter the Thai border area, locals have known that it is the sovereignty of states that creates the border and decides who can live within the border versus who cannot. However, in the context of Mae Salong village, the border also refers to internalised boundaries of identity. Since the first time I came to Mae Salong, I found it very different from other borderland villages that I visited in northern Thailand. I can easily use Mandarin in daily life, food provided by the restaurant is mainly Chinese style food, and in schools that I visited, the teaching language is traditional Chinese. However, it is important to note that the border in this context is also built in two directions, which not only connect Mae Salong with China but also Mae Salong with Myanmar. My respondent, Yang,

told me that 'more and more young people are leaving Myanmar to work here due to the political instability in Myanmar'. Yang, himself also came from Myanmar in the 1970s, he is now a manager at one of the biggest hostels in Mae Salong. He told me that all of the staff in his hostel are coming from Myanmar, from the mountain area of Kachin. However, compared with the 1970s, the boundary between identities has been blurred. Ming told me that at the time he came to Mae Salong, he did not speak mandarin. He was forced to go to the mandarin school to learn the language. However, in this generation, the staff of Ming only go to Thai school. Therefore, the boundary between Chinese identity and Burmese identity has been more porous since language education no longer has to be mandatory. People are more likely to cross the physical border but less likely to cross the imagined border or the boundary of identities.

Generational dynamics is an important concept for anthropologists to study the transition of national identities. In southeast Asia, many anthropologists found the relationship in establishing national identity and schooling. Anderson (1972: 18 cited in Bexley & Tchailoro 2013: 412) has stated that 'Nationalism was the only explanation that could be given for each student's having made the journey from whatever home he had left to enter one classroom with the others. Only nationalism made sense of the new life on which they were collectively embarked'. Moreover, in terms of Timor youth, according to Angie Bexley and Nuno Tchailoro's (2013) research on the identity of youth in Timor, schooling especially nationalist schooling is essential in reshaping the identity of youth generation as attending different schools lead to different national identities and political opinions intergenerationally. The case of Mae Salong can also be explained in this way. Zhu is working at a local Chinese primary school as a calligraphy teacher. He told me that the educational system has changed very much since the time they first came here. Before the 1980s, when the local government reached an agreement with the Thai government, Chinese school was mandatory for all children in the village. However, after the war against Thai communist, residents in the village have been officially accepted by Thailand. Thai schools are required to be set up in order to improve Thai education in the village. At the time, the children's schedule had been changed. Children are required to attend Thai school in the daytime from Monday to Friday and optionally attend Chinese school in the evening

time and Saturday. Chang's (2001) ethnography on Chinese education in migrant's villages has justified this point as he points out that 'the schools are not officially recognized by the Thai government. The lessons can only be taught before and after the hours of study at the Thai school '. In other words, students receive Chinese lessons in the early morning and evening in the Chinese schools but go to Thai schools during the day' which leads to the fact that 'in most villages, the Chinese lessons are only up to the primary level '(1099). The educational reforms explain the declining stickiness of youth generational Chinese identity. Another story that happened on my dinner with Ming, Zhu and Zhu's children also justified this point. Zhu has told me that every March 29th, all Chinese refugee villages gather together in hosting a sports meeting. There is a big broadcast on the road that publicises the sports game. Notably, the sports meeting has a long name 'Mae Salong Three Two Nine Princess Cup Youth Anti-Drug Campaign'. The name can explain the duality in terms of the identities of Mae Salong people. Three Two Nine is the youth day that they used to celebrate when they were in Yunnan, Zhu has explained to me. The Princess cup refers to people's loyalty to the Thai royal family. The Anti-Drug movement can be seen as the connection between Mae Salong people and their Thai identity because the royal family has invested a lot in improving alternative planting in Mae Salong. 'we only celebrate for 329' Ming added, 'the rest of the title is only used for applying budget from the government'. Some of his friends start laughing then. However, it seems to me that their children disagree with them, since they are posting many contents on their social media in remembering the connections between the village and the princess. Therefore, for the older generation, their identity was much more attached with their Chinese identity, the Thai identity is more for financial or economic reasons. However, for young people, they are more attached with their Thai identity.

On the other hand, in terms of the physical border, the movement of people also has intergenerational differences. The concept, border, means the Thai-Burmese border for most of the older generations. However, for the younger generation, border refers to the boundary between Mae Salong and other Thai provinces. As I stated previously, borders are not as simple as a line that separates two regions. Robert Kaiser (2012) has suggested that bordering performative is 'a spatial as well as social set of repetitive

practices through which socio-spatial categories or signifiers (e.g., identity, place, scale) materialise as things in the world, as essences “out there” (523). For the case of Mae Salong, the main border performatives are the police stations on the road between Mae Salong nor and the road to Chiang Mai. Zhu told me ‘we are not allowed to pass the station because we don’t have an ID card, if we are caught (by police), we will be brought to the prison until our family pays thousands of Thai baht. For younger generations, the existence of the border police means working outside of the town is difficult as it’s nearly impossible to find a job without a legal identity. For them, ‘a better future prospect does not exist in the villages for most of the members. Like many rural Thai youngsters, they see cities as more promising. Migration to cities (mostly to Bangkok and Chiang Mai) offers the possibilities to pursue better lives’ (Chang 2001: 1098). Some of the top members of the army have set up some social networks in Bangkok in helping youth in settling down in Bangkok. Xiang’s father used to be the head of finance in the army. Xiang told me that some of the residents ‘smuggled’ to Bangkok in the past and they set up a local network in Bangkok who created a meeting point around Chinatown in Bangkok. If someone in the village has successfully escaped from the ‘border control’ of the police station, they can come to the point to meet with Xiang, and Xiang will help them to settle down. However, in general, the majority of the Mae Salong people were still not able to have such mobility. Yang told me that ‘without that card, we are always stateless’.

This brought my memories back to the first time I met Zhu, in his calligraphy lesson. He told me when I write calligraphy in Chinese characters, ‘don’t move your hands, move the paper’. From my perspective, this symbolised the forced movement of the Yunnanese refugees in Mae Salong. Hands represent the power that forced them to move or not to move, the war, the economic situations, the border police. The paper symbolises the life that they want to pursue. Stable, prosperous life with Yunnanese tea and flowers. They really hope that the hands do not move again to force them to leave or to stay. But so long as current conditions hold, they are still able to establish a translocal area in Thailand in a transitioning context. I still remember on my first day when I met Bo, he directed me to one of his favourite tombs that he designed. It consisted entirely of historical monuments in Yunnan, their hometown. He told me

'This is the place where this person wants to go back so his family asked me to paint the historical sights on the tombs'. Here, nostalgia becomes materialised on tombs, on paper, on textbooks... and everything is stored in the mountain.

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