

Burmese Migrant Domestic Workers

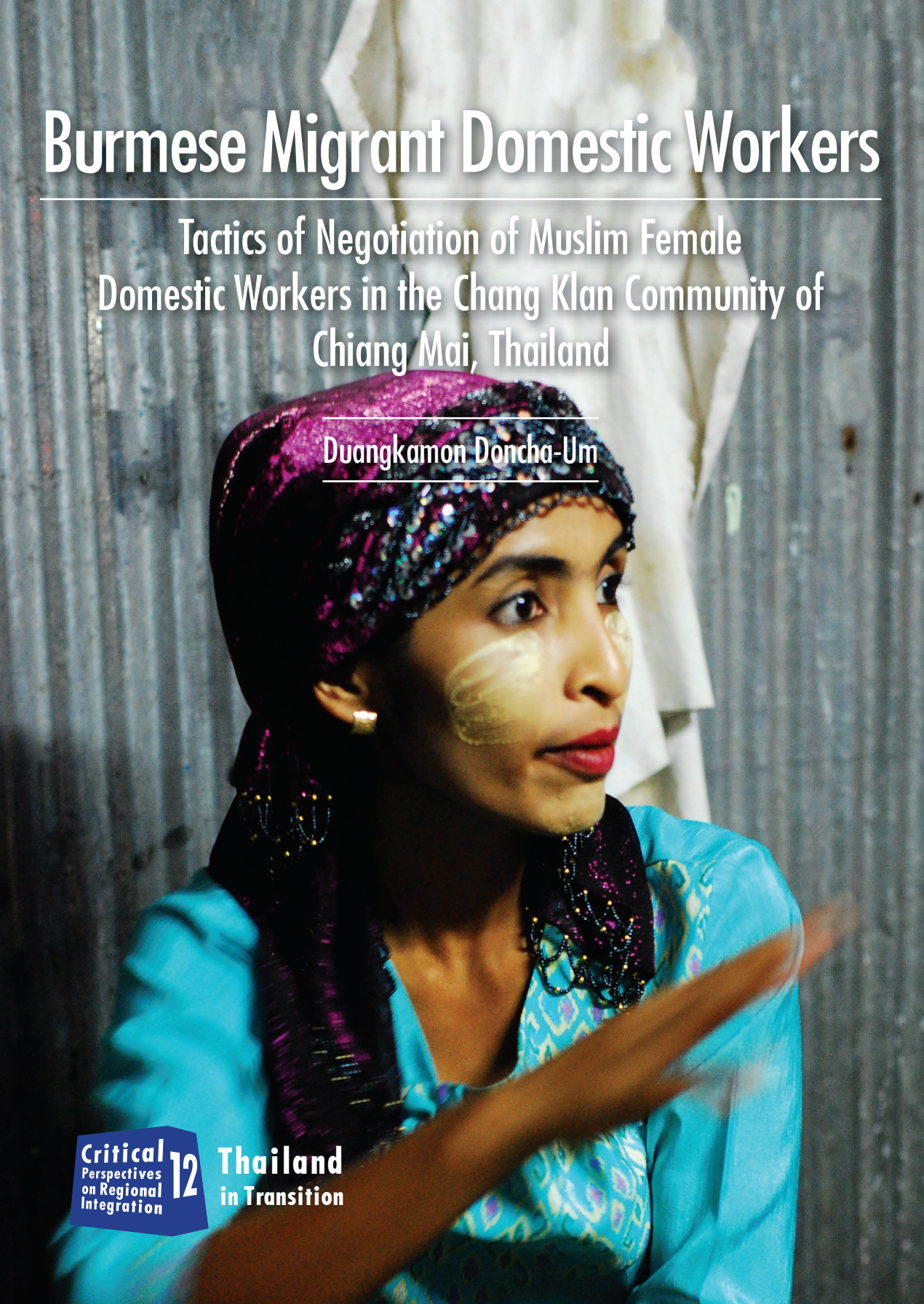
Tactics of Negotiation of Muslim Female
Domestic Workers in the Chang Klan Community of
Chiang Mai, Thailand

Duangkamon Doncha-Um

Critical
Perspectives
on Regional
Integration

12

Thailand
in Transition



Series Foreword

The monographs that comprise the Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration series have emerged from dissertations based on original primary field research, and written as a major part of the requirements for the Master of Social Science (Development Studies) program of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

As Senior Editorial Adviser, I was engaged by the Center to conduct an overview of the dissertations—dating back to 2001 and now well over 100 pieces of work—and select which of them would best illustrate the quality of graduate student research. This was by no means an easy task, but it was decided to choose primarily those written in the past few years, given that empirical research in social science tends to date rapidly. Another consideration was that the monographs should give expression to the main theme of the series of Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration.

As the selection and editorial work proceeded it was then decided to organize the publications into sub-series focused on different parts of mainland Southeast Asia. The first several volumes focus on Myanmar, covering such subjects as livelihood strategies, changing ethnic identities, borders and boundary-crossing, and the commoditization of culture within the context of ethnic tourism. Following volumes are devoted to Thailand, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The series also illustrates the concern to bring together social science and natural science knowledge in order to further the understanding of sustainable development issues. Over some 20 years Chiang Mai University has developed considerable research expertise in such fields as resource management, environmental impact assessment, upland agricultural systems and indigenous knowledge, health, and ethnic and gender relations. Teaching and research in development issues also deploys social science concepts within the development field to address decision-making, policy and practice, and the responses and adaptations of local populations.

This current monograph series also focuses on the processes of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental change among populations and territories undergoing rapid transformations within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Victor T. King

Senior Editorial Adviser, Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration Series

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Burmese Migrant Domestic Workers

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Duangkamon Doncha-Um

Burmese Muslim female migrant domestic workers live their lives in a host society—the predominantly Muslim Chang Klan neighborhood of Chiang Mai city in northern Thailand. These women seek to transform their vulnerable, marginalized identities as Burmese (race), Muslims (religion), migrants (migration status), domestic workers (class), and women (gender) into social capital via various tactics of negotiation in the community in which they have resettled.

Although these women are frequently subject to exploitation from their employers, host society, and the Thai state due to their stigmatized and marginalized identities, they are not simply victims and passive agents of structures of inequality. In their daily lives these women employ various methods to turn their ethnic identity as Burmese, religious identity as Muslim, and gender identity as women into forms of social capital. Despite holding “weak” positions in inequal structures, they manage to use their class and migration status as tactics of negotiation to further their goals of upward mobility.

The setting of the Chang Klan Muslim migrant enclave community helps to facilitate the lives of Burmese Muslim female migrants, and has become a space of exception for Burmese Muslim migrants, where they are increasingly able to fulfill their religious, economic, and social aspirations.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Help is a recent book (Stockett, 2009) and popular Hollywood movie (dir. Taylor, 2011) about the relationship between a young, idealistic white woman and two black female domestic workers in the southern US state of Mississippi. The story is loosely based on the true stories of African American domestic workers in the 1960s. The book and film follow a white woman as she seeks to write and publish a book about the lives of black domestic workers during a period of pervasive and often overt racism in the USA. Black domestic workers were routinely discriminated against and treated as slaves by their employers and the employers' families. It was nearly impossible for them to raise their voices and have them heard. However, as the *The Help* demonstrates, with bravery and commitment, a handful of black domestic workers eventually managed to escape the boundaries that confined them.

While the book and film reflect the bitter and dehumanizing experiences of black domestic workers during the civil rights era of the US, it also offers optimism that resistance and negotiation can effectively counteract stigma and discrimination. However, while the situation of domestic workers in the US has improved since the mid-twentieth century, the lives of migrant domestic workers in many areas of the world have remained inordinately difficult. This is indeed the case for the subjects of this study, Muslim female migrant domestic workers from Burma living in Thailand.

At the global level, the issue of migrant domestic workers has been studied in a plethora of settings and from a variety of perspectives. With the

transnational flows of capital and labor taking place in the current globalized economy, migrant domestic workers' lives often reflect the intensive, dominant lines of social differentiation and power that exist in many societies. Aspects of inequality appear within the migrant domestic work sector based on class, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and migration status (Anderson, 2000). While many studies have investigated the exploited and vulnerable lives of transnational domestic workers, migrations of those seeking—or at least reconciling themselves to—this type of work continue unabated.

Colen and Sanjek (1990) put forward three theoretical approaches to understanding the movements of migrant domestic workers. The first, the modernization framework, proposes uniform, country-by-country stages of development and changes in household work forms. This scenario usually begins with male household workers, who are replaced in turn by females working in factories and other forms of employment, to be replaced in the end by household workers from 'outside.'

The second theoretical approach is the world economic system, in which household work is viewed historically, locally, and contextually within a capitalist worldview. As capitalism grows and recomposes through booms and busts, and develops and under-develops, so emigration and immigration flows are triggered, cities built and villages depopulated, all helping to shape the local demand for labor. These labor demands include not only waged labor in the formal sector, but also waged labor in the informal sector, including domestic work.

The third approach takes the participants' point-of-view, examining work and recruitment conditions, the costs and benefits of becoming or remaining a household worker, the constraints placed on leaving the role, and the social arenas the workers themselves occupy outside their work. This actor-centered approach explains why these women choose to work as domestic laborers, how long they continue to do this kind of work, what types of social capital they use in order to find work, and how they manage to negotiate.

The three approaches delineated by Colen and Sanjek (1990) can be applied to the situations encountered by many migrant workers from Burma living in Thailand. Modernization is one of the major reasons Burmese women migrate to seek work in Thailand, as many of them are shown images of Thailand by their friends and family members. What they see in the pictures of Thailand

is a more modern society than their own, and this encourages them to migrate, following their friends or relatives and utilizing available migration networks. The extremity of economic hardship experienced by the vast majority of the population in Burma pushes the females to seek work in Thailand, as Thailand seems to offer them greater opportunities to earn money. Many family members remaining in Burma come to rely upon the remittances sent home by these migrant workers, for without these remittances, children could not afford to go to schools and parents could not access healthcare services.

Beyond modernization and economic necessity, the actor-oriented approach can be used to explain why these women decide to migrate. The women use many forms of social capital in order to assist and expedite their migration, with the migrant networks that exist being one such form of social capital they can use to cross the border, find accommodation, and eventually work, in Thailand.

Over the past two decades, Thailand has experienced a large-scale immigration of undocumented migrants from neighboring countries such as Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. The total number of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand today is estimated to be between 1,500,000 and 1,600,000, with over 100,000 women from Burma employed as domestic workers throughout the country. Because of the availability of cheap labor from neighboring countries, more and more families in Thailand are paying for household services where previously they had relied upon unpaid family labor. Migration has thus been proposed as a solution to an existing employment gap; however, the work of domestic and care services in private homes is still categorized as unskilled, and is not recognized in many countries as an appropriate category for immigration (Panam, et al., 2004).

Despite the large number of female migrants from Burma working within the domestic sector in Thailand, few studies have been carried out to explore this subject. In her research on Burmese domestic workers in Thailand, Sureeporn (2000) argues that the degree of labor exploitation among domestic workers has increased in recent times and has become more complicated. Due to the private and confined workspace, domestic workers tend to live and work in poor living conditions, with low pay or sometimes no payment at all. Similarly, Panam (2004), in a study of Burmese domestic workers in Chiang Mai and

Mae Sot, found that these migrant workers are uniquely vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of their employers.

The issue of labor exploitation among domestic workers is well recognized, and many organizations have decided to focus on it—for example, the International Labour Organization (ILO)¹ and MAP² Foundation—but the problems remain unsolved. However, I would rather argue that although the existing literature and public discourse on domestic workers which employs a rights-based approach tends to assume that migrant workers are victims, in fact, they are not simply passive injured parties of their circumstances. This study attempts to examine more deeply how migrant domestic workers, despite being exploited and often living in poor conditions, use every means at their disposal to negotiate improvements in their everyday lives. I have chosen the site of a Burmese migrant community in the Chang Klan area of Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, as my subject area in order to investigate the negotiation tactics migrant domestic workers utilize. The Chang Klan community is interesting for the fact that it comprises a large number of female Muslim migrants from Burma engaged in domestic work. The fact that these women are not only Burmese, but also female, migrant, and Muslim, raises the question as to how all of these intersecting ‘marginalized’ identities interact with their ability to survive while living and working in Thailand.

The Chang Klan area is located to the west of the old wall of Chiang Mai city. It is estimated that there are about 2,000 Burmese Muslim migrants working and living in the area. The Muslim migrants from Burma in this community primarily arrived in Chiang Mai via three different routes from their country:

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- 1 International Labour Organization or ILO is the international organization responsible for drawing up and overseeing international labor standards.
 - 2 MAP Foundation is a grassroots non-governmental organization (NGO) that seeks to empower migrant communities from Burma living and working in Thailand. It has offices in Chiang Mai and a handful of other cities in Thailand.

via Mae Sai³ in Chiang Rai province, through Mae Sot⁴ in Tak province, and via Mae Sam Laep⁵ in Mae Hong Son province. Upon arrival in Chiang Mai, most find work in the community as wage laborers, food sellers, cleaners, and beggars. Among the migrants in the Chang Klan area, there are more than 100 women working as domestic helpers within the community itself. With little education at their disposal, these women have little choice in terms of the work they do, but domestic work is of little interest to Thai women, due to their higher levels of education and employment opportunities.

With the multiple statuses of being female, Muslim, domestic workers, and migrants, these women encounter myriad difficulties during their daily lives. Being a Muslim woman means that traveling or working outside the home is not encouraged, while from a social perspective, traveling from their home village in Burma to work in Thailand means that they have to cross not only a nation-state border, but also an ideological one in terms of being a good female Muslim, a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother. However, poverty and economic opportunity allows those women to negotiate their status, meaning they can justify earning money independently and sending remittances back home to support their families. Working and living in a Muslim community like Chang Klan on the one hand provides them with some benefits in the form of shared religious beliefs (for example, Muslim employers prefer to hire Muslim employees), but on the other hand means they are exploited as a lower class form of labor.

As female migrants from Burma, these women often have little choice but to work as low-status laborers, including as domestic workers. Employers prefer to hire workers from Burma because they are believed to work harder and for less money than Thai women. Significantly, Thai women are largely no

3 Mae Sai is the northernmost district (*amphur*) of Chiang Rai province in northern Thailand. The town of Mae Sai is a major border crossing between Thailand and Burma. Asian Highway Network AH2 (Thailand Route 1, or Phahonyothin Road) crosses the Mae Sai river to Tachileik in Burma's Shan State.

4 Mae Sot is a town in western Thailand that shares a border with Burma's Karen State to the west. It is notable as a trade hub and for its substantial population of migrants and refugees from all parts of Burma. The town is part of the larger Tak province and is the main land gateway between Thailand and Burma.

5 Mae Sam Laep is a village and *tambon* (subdistrict) of Sop Moei district in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand. In 2005 it had a total population of 9,802 people. The *tambon* contains 10 villages. Mae Sam Laep lies near the Burmese border on the Salween River.

longer willing to work as domestic workers, as their higher levels of education allow them greater job opportunities. However, even though they work at low paid, unskilled domestic labor, migrant women from Burma are still able to negotiate their positions within the domestic work hierarchy. There are several categories of domestic workers in Chang Klan, including those who live-in with their employers, those who live outside, those who work for restaurants or markets, and those who work for Thai companies.

Many scholars have pointed out that racial, class, gender, religious, and migration statuses often intersect to form the bases for discrimination and exploitation of migrant workers. This study, however, attempts to show how these women employ their marginalized identities as Burmese (race), Muslim (religion), female (gender), domestic workers (class), and migrants (migration status) as the basis for creative negotiation tactics in order to help them achieve their goals for their lives.

Contextual background

Who are the Burmese Muslims?

Historically, Muslim seamen first reached the coastal regions of Lower Burma and Arakan in the ninth century. Most of the Muslim travelers who traveled eastward at this time set out for China. It was with disappointment that some only reached Burma. In Burma, Muslim trade colonies had already been established in Pegu since the early ninth century by the time larger numbers of Arab merchants arrived there. At the southern end of Burma, the coastal regions of Arakan, the Irrawaddy Delta, Pegu, and Tenasserim were well known to Muslim sailors of the period, those who traded in the eastern waters. The first Muslim colonies in Burma were thus colonies of traders (Yegar, 1972: 2).

With the passing of the years, these Muslims married Burmese women, and the descendants of these Arab, Persian, and Indian Muslim traders formed the original nucleus for the 'Burmese Muslim' community, known by locals as the *Pathee* or *Kala*. As the years passed, the number of Muslims in Burma increased, due partly to the arrival of a growing number of Muslim traders and adventurers, and also as the result of the increasing number of descendants resulting from mixed marriages. However, there is no evidence to suggest that

religious conversion accounted for any significant amount of the increase in the number of Muslims in Burma, as was the case in other parts of the region, including Malaya and Indonesia. It seems more likely that the growth in the number of Muslims in Burma was due to immigration and the progeny of mixed marriages (Yegar, 1972: 7).

Nowadays, there are around five million Muslims in Burma among a total population of 55 million. There are two primary descendent groups among Muslims in Burma—the Sunni and the Shi'a from South Asia, and those of Yunnanese Chinese origin. These 'Indian' and 'Chinese' descendents are key minorities who contribute economically, culturally, and religiously in Burma (Berlie, 2008).

Because the historical context of the Burmese Muslims in Thailand is rarely extrapolated, this study will look at the journey of the Burmese Muslims from Burma over the border from Yunnan in China to Chiang Mai by referring to the work of French socio-anthropologist Jean Berlie (2000), who has studied both the identities and economic networks set up by the Muslims in Yunnan and northern Thailand. According to Berlie, the Yunnanese Muslims have long been involved in trade with Thailand and Laos, and Yunnanese Muslims are today present in Kengtung, eastern Burma, and in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. These Yunnanese Muslims are known by the locals in Thailand as *Khon Islam*, or simply as *Ho*. In China, their common and official designation *Hui* is a puzzling name, as the character also means 'return.' The more general *Huimin* is the designation for all Muslims in China, but the *Hui* themselves often prefer the term 'Muslim Chinese.' In the past, the inner mainland parts of Southeast Asia came largely under Yunnanese influence, while in Malaysia, Singapore, southern Thailand, Cambodia, southern Vietnam, and parts of ancient Hainan, the indigenous Malay and Cham populations constituted the dominant Muslim group (Berlie, 2000: 223).

Burmese Muslims on the routes: The underexplored background of Burmese Muslim migrants in Chiang Mai

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Chiang Mai, the economic impacts of the cross-border caravan trade were significant. During the winter and dry seasons each year, around 700 to 1,000 laden mules traveled out of Yunnan. The Yunnanese exported tea, opium, silk, iron and lead bars,

silver bullion, and copper utensils and pans (from Sichuan), as well as salt, jackets, and cloth. Yunnan and Kengtung (today a major city in eastern Shan State, Burma) together imported cotton, ivory, guns, European goods, gold dust, and bird's nests.

Along the ancient caravan route from Kunming to Chiang Mai, the Yunnanese used a network of mosques, which often sat on dominant hills such as those in Mojiang, Simao, and Menghai. The starting point for these Yunnanese Muslim traders was Dali, and they then passed through Burma before reaching Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The Yunnanese Muslims who traveled from Yunnan and passed into Burma and on to Chiang Mai left their marks through this network of mosques, which were used for both religious purposes and economic benefit. These Muslim traders created links along their route from China to Burma, as well as the other way from Burma to Chiang Mai. Along this route today, one can still trace through some of the mosques the strong links that existed between Yunnan and Southeast Asia, and in particular Chiang Mai. Histories regarding the Pakistani and Yunnanese Muslims have been well documented by Soonthornpasuch (1977) and Setthamalinee (2005); however, the Burmese Muslim migrants in Chiang Mai are not mentioned in their studies. As a result, I have chosen a research site in Chang Klan in order to study the lives of female Muslim migrant domestic workers from Burma.

Chang Klan: The site of a Burmese Muslim migrant community

The population of the Chang Klan Muslim community is around 10,000 people. In total, 70% of the population of Chang Klan is Muslim, with Buddhists comprising the remainder. Chang Klan is a multi-ethnic community and has the largest Muslim population in Chiang Mai. In the Chang Klan area are Pakistani Muslims who migrated from eastern India around 1870 and Yunnanese Muslims who have been migrating from Yunnan Province in southwestern China since the nineteenth century. Later, around three decades ago, Burmese Muslims also started arriving to work as wage laborers, construction workers, and domestic servants in the area. Nowadays, the Pakistanis and Yunnanese Muslims are Thai citizens like the northern Thais. Only the Burmese Muslims, who are relative newcomers, are considered as 'aliens' by the modern Thai nation state, or as undocumented migrants and low-skilled workers.

At present, there are an estimated 7,000 Burmese Muslim migrants in Chang Klan, and these can be divided into three sub-groups. The first group migrated from Burma through Mae Sot in Tak province before traveling on to Chiang Mai, while the second group migrated from Shan State in eastern Burma to Mae Sai in Chiang Rai province and then on to Chiang Mai. The final group migrated from Mae Sam Laep, Mae Hong Son province, direct to Chiang Mai. In Chang Klan, the majority of these migrants work as wage laborers, food sellers, cleaners, or beggars. Among the thousands of Burmese workers in the city, it is estimated that more than 100 women are employed as domestic workers, and these women will be the main focus of this study.

Research questions and objectives

As a Thai female researcher with several identities in common with, as well as opposite, the participants at the heart of this study, I hoped to be able to learn from these women answers to the following research questions:

1. How and under what circumstances do female Burmese Muslim migrant domestic workers utilize their intersecting marginalized identities to survive in Chiang Mai, Thailand?
2. How does being a member of the Muslim community in Chang Klan help facilitate the lives of these domestic workers?
3. Outside their workspaces, how do these women construct their social lives and how has their intersectionality become part of their social capital?

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To better understand how these women strategically utilize their different identities with various actors and in diverse situations;
2. To better understand the importance of the Muslim community in terms of supporting them as Muslim women; and
3. To better understand the ways in which these women have managed to transform their intersecting identities into social capital, as well as the ways in which they have constructed a social life within a Muslim community in Chiang Mai.

Theoretical overview

Intersectionality

Intersectionality as a theory and methodology for studying the relationships among multiple dimensions and the modalities of social relationships and subject formations was first introduced by the American civil rights advocate, feminist theorist, and critical race scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989). The theory seeks to explain how various biological, social, and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, and ability, as well as other axes of identity, interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. Intersectionality suggests that the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and religion-based bigotry, do not operate independently of one another; instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the ‘intersection’ of multiple forms of discrimination.

Intersectionality may be defined as a theory operationalized so as to allow for the analysis of how social and cultural categories intertwine. Knudsen (2006) uses intersectionality in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, and nationality. The word ‘intersection’ itself means the location where one line cuts through another, and so is often applied to streets crossing each other. From the beginning, intersectionality was introduced as an intersection in the American sense of the word, to denote ways in which People of Color cross gender and/or sexuality categories. American researchers have criticized gender-based research for producing diversity in terms of gender, but a homogenized view of race. In feminist studies, women and their individual experiences are considered as different and heterogeneous across and within the female and male categories. However, when it comes to the question of race, critics argued that feminist studies simplistically interpreted women and men as having similar experiences across races. With the American concept of intersectionality, the focus is often thus on race and gender. Because early intersectionality studies concentrated on the poor and marginalized population of People of Color in the US, the class dimension was often implied in the theoretical reflections and analysis. Since that time, (dis)ability status and sexual orientation have been integrated into the theory of intersectionality.