

# Burmese Religion in Thailand

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## Introduction

Political restrictions and economic hardship have persisted since the coup of Burma in 1962. Poverty has forced citizens to look for jobs in neighboring countries, notably Thailand, where many jobs for unskilled laborers are available. The Thai economy boomed from the 1970s to the second half of the 1990s and, because of this, there was a high demand for workers who could occupy the so-called "3D jobs", referring to jobs that are dirty, difficult, and dangerous. The push and pull factors between job seekers from Myanmar and job availability in Thailand were mutually beneficial causing countless Myanmar workers to move to Thailand over several decades. It is reported that between 1.5 and 2 million Myanmar people have migrated to Thailand over the past two decades (Banki, 2009, 51; Myat Mon 2010, 34; Brees, 2010 284; Eberle and Holliday 2011, 371 quoted in Egretau 2012, 123). One of the popular destinations in Thailand for Myanmar migrant workers is Samut Sakhon, one of the central provinces of Thailand which covers approximately 872 square meters. Samut Sakhon is 48 kilometers away from Bangkok, at the mouth of Tha Jeen River and borders Bangkok, Samut Songkhram, Ratchburi, and Nakhon Pathom.

Samut Sakhon has a high concentration of Myanmar migrant workers, numbering approximately 400,000 (TFFA Report 2013, 44). The official Data Centre of Samut Sakhon estimates the proportion of local population and migrant workers at a ratio of 2:1. Included in these figures is an estimated number of 100,000 illegal migrant workers (the Nation, 2014). Samut Sakhon earns approximately 264,766 million Baht every year (TFFA Report, 2013, 44). More than 4,000 factories are related to fishery industries employing foreign workers. They are the leading GDP of the province, and as of 2013 were highly ranked at seventh place of Thailand's GDP cities (TFFA, 2013, 44). Migrant workers in Samut Sakhon come from Thailand's neighboring countries, primarily Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar. Among these groups, migrants from Myanmar are by far the highest number of migrant workers in Thailand.

Once Myanmar migrant workers migrate to Thailand, they have to negotiate and adapt their routine life to be able to live in Thailand. Myanmar migrant workers have adapted to the Thai working style, way of eating, law and political areas, as well as fashion. However, the Buddhist beliefs, rituals, and activities of the Myanmar migrant workers play an integral role in their lives. This paper presents Myanmar migrant workers' beliefs implicitly and explicitly through their social network participation, namely within the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association.

## Framework and Methodology

Social networks are regarded as a form of social capital since they efficiently connect and provide members access to valuable opportunities such as those within the job market or those in educational institutions. Bourdieu and Wacquant explicate that: "Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual that accrues to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a

endurable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” (1992, 19). For Bourdieu and Wacquant, social networks can be analyzed as a subset of social capital. Social capital can accumulate through various forms of group interactions as long as people in the society have an agreed upon system of values. In this case, social capital can be used as a social distinction to differentiate statuses of individuals from inside and outside group members. It is widely accepted by scholars that a social network is a form of social capital and often accelerated by migration in which migrants can make use of in order to facilitate their living in a new country (Vertovec 2009, Bauder 2006, Arango 2005, and Portes 1998). To reflect on Myanmar migrant workers daily life in relation to their inherited beliefs, the main informal social network in Samut Sakhon, the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association is presented regarding their functions and implications, as well as how Myanmar migrant workers make use of this social network in terms of social capital. The criteria of analyzing a social network include size, density, multiplexity, cluster, strength of ties, content, reachability, and frequency (Vertovec, 2009). Social capital is vital for comprehending the ways in which ones are positioned in given fields (Erel 2010, 646). The analysis of the local social network and the structure of migrants’ relationships within the built network can be explored in order to justify the occurrence of migrants’ communities in the context of religious beliefs.

For the research methodology, this paper explores qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviews. There are fifty-seven Myanmar migrant workers participating in the current research project. Thirty-eight Myanmar males and nineteen females were interviewed. During the interviews in Samut Sakhon, the issue of ethnicity was strongly emphasised by participants, especially those belonging to the Mon sub-group. This group demonstrated their strong will to self-identify as Mon. Ethnicity is still a prevalent issue for people from Myanmar although the country’s name was changed from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. Because of this, the country is still divided along the lines of ethnicity. Despite the Bamar ethnic group being the majority, the number of Mon workers is higher in Samut Sakhon. It is estimated that the number of Myanmar workers in the province is made of 50% Mon, 30% Bamar, 10% Karen, and 10% others including Shan, Kachin, Tawai, and Pao (LPN and JHSPH, 2011). There is also a connection between ethnicity and place of residence, as certain ethnicities are concentrated in certain areas. Names like Mon State, Kachin State, or Karen State are given to the various states in accordance with the ethnicity of people living in that area. The correlation is so prevalent that one can delineate a Myanmar migrant workers place of residence through their ethnicity and vice versa.

## Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar

Buddhism - *Theravāda* Buddhism is the national religion of Myanmar, practiced by the citizens and supported by the government. Although countless people migrate from Myanmar to Thailand, Myanmar people still strongly uphold Buddhism. Thailand and Myanmar have a common doctrine of Buddhism which is the national religion of *Theravāda*. The main religious activities are largely similar, yet there are slight differences which are seen in related religious architecture and temple decoration style. The immense golden pagodas surrounded by numerous small pagodas in the temple area are designed after the prominent Myanmar style temples. Myanmar temples can also be recognised by Human Lion - *Manussasiṃha*: two human lion statues guarding the front of the temple gate. The Human Lion is sometimes addressed only as “lion” or “guarding lion”. Recently, the tradition of the remaining Human Lion at the temple gate or the entrance of the Pagoda has become widespread in Myanmar and some parts of Thailand.

Even though the disciplines of monks (*Vinaya*) in Myanmar and Thailand are the same, some practices are different. The dissimilarity between Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar can be

seen, for example, in the yellow robes that the monks wear. A number of monks in Myanmar wear robes swathed in a combination of red and yellow, while monks in Thailand generally wear pure yellow robes. Monks in Thailand also customarily wear a waistband as part of their attire, while monks in Myanmar do not wear a strip of cloth around their waist. Additionally, monks in Thailand practice eyebrow shaving, while monks in Myanmar do not. Even though there are some differences in religious practices between these two countries, Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand still participate in Buddhist religious activities in Thailand. It is found that they are strongly religious and willing to participate in Buddhist religious events held in Samut Sakhon. The strong faith of the Myanmar people is shown through the large sum of money spent in order to support the construction of Myanmar style temples in Samut Sakhon. The strong faith of the numerous migrant workers leads to the creation of countless networks in order to strengthen Buddhism with the traditional Myanmar style as much as possible.

However, Myanmar is comprised of numerous ethnicities in its country. To name only a few ethnicities in Myanmar are the Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine, and Shan. Among these larger ethnic groups, Bamar is considered the largest group that officially rules in Myanmar. Mon is another ethnic group that makes up a large number in the Mon State of Myanmar. Numerous Mon insist on not being called "Burmese" because, according to them, they do not belong to the same nation or ethnicity. Mon is described as Rarmarn in ancient times and in Thai history. Nevertheless, because Bamar, Mon, or other ethnic groups migrate to Thailand and work as migrant workers, most Thai people nowadays call any ethnic groups from Myanmar Burmese. This is because it is practical for common Thai people to group foreigners by referring to the majority group as well as by identifying them by their geographical origin. Although for Thai people it is common to call any ethnic minorities from Myanmar Burmese, it is not the case for other minorities to accept this, especially for those belonging to the Mon ethnic group. The distinction between Bamar and Mon is not only limited to self-identification, but also extends to the areas of lifestyle, interactions, and social network selection. In Samut Sakhon, both Bamar and Mon are considered by the locals as religious and donate large amounts of their money to Buddhism, relative to their limited income. In Samut Sakhon, the Bamar established their own networks to serve their religious needs. The popular related religious network of Burmese culture is "Wishful Wat Hon Pagoda" or, in Thai, the "Wat Noi Nang Hong Association". The next discussion uses the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association as a case study to illustrate the beliefs of Myanmar migrant workers through their everyday activities concerning religious rituals in social networks.

## Findings

Wat Noi Nang Hong Association is known as **ဝပ်ဟန် ဆုတောင်း ပြည်စေတီတော်** in Burmese. The Burmese name is pronounced "Wat-hon-su-taung-pye-se-ti-taw" which means "Wishful Wat Hon Pagoda". The group members adopted two Thai words for their group: Wat means Temple and Hon (g) means Lion in Thai. The Wat Noi Nang Hong Association was formed within the Noi Nang Hong Temple situated in the Tha-Jeen sub-district of Samut Sakhon. Prior to the large influx of Myanmar migrants in Samut Sakhon during the 1980s, the Wat Noi Nang Hong was decorated in the Thai temple style and most people who came and supported the temple were Thai.

However, Wat Noi Nang Hong gradually became the place for Myanmar people in Samut Sakhon who funded the building of pagodas and other Myanmar temple style decorations. The construction of pagodas and other traditional decorations was completed on April 15th in 2007. Up to 25,000 Myanmar workers attended the opening ceremony; it was well known that the funding for the construction came from Myanmar migrant workers in Samut Sakhon (OKNation,

2012). Even though it is located Thailand, after the construction in 2007, the atmosphere of Wat Noi Nang Hong is much more similar to temples in Myanmar. Specifically, the architectural style of this temple is reminiscent of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar.

After the opening ceremony, Wat Noi Nang Hong has been considered a crucial network for facilitating temple activities for Myanmar migrants in Samut Sakhon. The network is known as the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association. The association works to promote religiously affiliated activities and events. The temple also functions as a centre of spiritual support for migrants.

## The Wat Noi Nang Hong Association's Characteristics

*Size and density:* Given the fact that 25,000 migrant workers attended the opening ceremony, it is safe to say that there is an interest in the temple. Millions of baht were collectively donated by Myanmar migrant workers in order to achieve their budget. However, data is not sufficient to generalize the number of members within the association. The estimated number of members from observation in Asaha Puja Day in July 2013 is approximately 500 people. On that day, they wore T-shirts from the association which identified them as a member. Nevertheless, the number of people who are in contact with the association is limited within sub-group categories such as workplace or peer groups. The density of each workplace network is approximately 100 people. The ethnic factor plays an important role for classifying to which network individuals should belong.

I am a member of the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association. We aim to build up the pagodas and we help each other hold religious ceremonies here every year. Why I choose to be a member here ... actually I visit any temples in the province. But, I just like to donate and make merits here. This temple uses the Burmese language, while others adopt the Mon language. I am a member here because we are familiar and speak the same language. (Aye Kywe, Wat Noi Nang Hong Association, May 2014)

The large size of the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association and the marked concentration of Bamar ethnic migrants are potential factors to attract more Myanmar migrant workers to move to Samut Sakhon where integration or adaption is unnecessary as there are already substantial Myanmar networks.

*Multiplexity and cluster:* The multiplexity of the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association is relatively informal among members. Individual members associate with each other through the work place, peer networks, and family ties. Ethno networks like the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association segment the group from outsiders. The association also plays a role as a useful information source regarding jobs, accommodations, and services to ethnic members. The multiplexity of the ethnic network can provide migrant workers with an informal economy and a secondary division of the labor market (Bauder 2006, 153). Regarding cluster, the specific area of a wider network is to promote primarily Buddhist religious activities during events, for instance holidays like Makha Bucha Day or Visakha Bucha Day.

*Strength of ties and content:* Numerous members of the association reply that they feel they belong to the network at Wat Noi Nang Hong. Most of them further assert that they are willing to give any means of support including financial or labor force to assist temple affairs. Around 1,000 Myanmar migrant workers joined the Asaha Puja Day in July 2013 and numerous members contributed to the event preparation prior to the festival. This implies the strong tie of members to the network. The rationale of the strong tie is correspondent with the content of members towards their interactions with the temple. Most Myanmar migrant members express that making a donation is a necessary thing to do in life. If possible for their income, they are happy to donate

to the temple as much as they can. In case financial support is not an option, Myanmar members are likely to donate their labor to assist in temple activities. Myanmar members believe that the ones who join this network do so because they want to help and to see others help the temple in any of its activities.

They donate a lot of their income to charity as well as participate in religious events often. Why is that? Many interviewees reveal that they believe making donations or donating labor to the temple as well as charity events can improve their quality of life or improve their chances in the next life. A number of Myanmar migrants believe in supernatural forces that can save them from hardship and make their wishes come true one day if they consistently donate to the religion. Many migrants have said that, although the effective results of their donation might not concretely appear in this life time, they believe that for the next life what they donate to the religion will pay off, and they will not suffer the hardship of being a laborer in the next life.

I don't like going to the shopping mall on my day-off like Thai workers do. I seldom go to the mall because I don't want to spend a lot at the mall. I prefer to save that sum of money for making merits and donations at this temple. (Why?) I am, and so to my life, ill-fated. My parents are divorced; I can't finish school. I would like to make merits, so my next life wouldn't end up like this again. (Kywe Lwin, Wat Noi Nang Hong Association, May 2014)

I donate money often, but the amount is not that high. I donate because I want to have a good life after I die. I am old already. I don't want to go to the cinema. I want peace. I hope that next life I will be born to be a human being, and will not have to live separately from my family like I face now. (Daw Mya Kywe, Wat Noi Nang Hong Association, May 2014)

Women participants tend to reveal their opinions more openly regarding their religious expectations than men do. The answers from Bamar women link clearly with religion, donation, and the good life. These justifications provide a rationale for participation in religious networks. Interviewed men did not give a clear reason why they support religion. Bamar men tend to say that they donate as it is expected of Buddhists by the community. However, a number of male workers who described themselves as Mon gave the same reasons as Bamar females of their rationales of making merits.

Additionally, giving donations can be considered symbolic capital valued by the Myanmar migrant workers. Despite their relatively low socio-economic status, making donations seems to be a status marker amongst the laborer. The symbolic capital of the donation making also gives way to social capital because other members tend to recognise and invite big donors to any coming events.

In the important religious event held here (Wat Noi Nang Hong), I see many of us, Burmese keep eyes on each other and sometimes Thais also watch us. Many Burmese migrants are insulted including me. When I don't have enough money I mean in a decent sum for donation, they gossip about me. They judge others from whether we have gold to wear or how much we put money in the donation box. It is a form of proving your economic status while you are in Thailand. I wish I could have a car or a motorcycle to ride to the temple when there are important religious events, so people would judge me better. I am saving up for buying a motorcycle now. I want other Burmese to see that my life quality is nicer. I also would like to support food, Khanom Jin Nam Ya (made of rice noodles mixed with a soup or curry) to the temple in the important religious events. Rich Burmese migrant workers can donate many

thousands baht to the temple and treat other members with Khanom Jin Nam Ya. I would like to do so too because it is believed that the donor's life will be long just like the length of the noodles. Still, I could not afford to do so in Thailand. (Aye Kywe, Wat Noi Nang Hong Association, May 2014)

I am actually Christian, but I accompany my Burmese friends to the Buddhist event. This event is not just for Buddhist migrants, but I think it is also our national event as well. We all can join regardless to the religion. I dress nicely and wear all my golden items that I have. You know I just wear gold only on special occasions. It is not safe to wear it every day as there are many thieves here. To me it is a good opportunity for men to show off what we have to women from Myanmar in this province (said with a smile). (Htin Nu, Wat Noi Nang Hong Association, May 2014)

The interpretation of religious event participation and behaviors involve considerations of symbolic and social capital. The network can provide members with social capital, but not every member can make use of this capital. "Transnational religious systems also provide venues for asserting one's enhanced status and for acquiring social capital and resources" (Peterson and Vasquez, 2001 quoted in Levitt and Schiller 2007, 195). In the case of Myanmar migrant workers, members are likely to present their economic and symbolic capital through specific adornments and donating to charity. Migrants who behave in the ways favored by their group tend to be recognised by the group members, which leads them to a position where they can enjoy network connections. This economic-based value brings about symbolic violence that is produced and reproduced by many migrant workers and can be viewed as critical barriers to block outsiders or unqualified members to join the networks.

Counterintuitively, the migrant workers donate well beyond their status. It does not make sense to believe that they are actually rich enough to spend thousands of baht to the charity as they earn only 300 baht per day. The interviewee, a Bamar man, points out that if Myanmar migrants are really rich, they would not come to Thailand and work as laborers. With respect to the given reason and reality, it can be argued that spending on religion activities serves two core desires. First, donors spend because of their strong Buddhist faith and desire for a better life. Faith, in this instance, overcomes reality, causing many to ignore economic constraints and omit the proper calculation for an appropriate donation. Second, donations can be another form of representing one's symbolic and social capital. Interestingly, it is important to note that none of the interviewees mention their expectation of joining the religious network and of making merit to the desire of religious enlightenment or the omniscience which is one of the key principals of Buddhism.

*Reachability:* Although financial support comes mainly from Myanmar migrant workers, the temple also welcomes everyone who visits. However, the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association seems to be limited to the Myanmar migrant group. Locals are normally not interested in joining Myanmar networks. Joining the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association is quite simple. Interested applicants can ask other current members to join. The membership fee is 100 baht per month and members are required to buy the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association's t-shirt which costs 100 baht for their entry into the network. After joining, members typically come with their workplace colleagues or friend groups to help with the association's tasks.

*Frequency:* The frequency of contact between members depends on the temple activities. There are at least five big events throughout the year. The five major Buddhist dates are: Makha Bucha Day in February, Visakha Bucha Day in May, Asaha Bucha in July, Wan Khao Pansa in July, and Wan Awk Pansa in October. The five important dates of Buddhism are held as a reminder of the important events of Buddhism where the day and month of events vary from year to year due to the yearly lunar calendar. There are also other festivals that relate to religious

activities, such as the New Year festival and the Song Karn Festival, in which the workers also take part. It can be seen that the events occur almost every two months and some months have double the size of typical events that require massive preparation from members. This means that the frequency of contact among the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association's members is high. Additionally, individual contact between members also happens independently from event obligations.

The crucial underlying role of social capital for the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association is the psychological support which is reflected through individuals' interpretations of their religious actions. The associated factors of those interpretations are the inherited personal beliefs, gender, and migration. Many interviewees reveal they have been taught the benefits of donations since they were young. This value is still reproduced by families and monks, generation after generation. One interview participant, a monk, confirmed that he has taught and transferred this value. Donations can also be a symbolic action that Myanmar migrant workers use to imply their wealthy status and generosity to their fellows- a practice of donating meals at the temple during Buddhist events.

Put in another way, the Wat Noi Nang Hong Association does not have to put much effort in demonstrating the advantages of making merits as this value has long been in existence in Myanmar society. Most Myanmar migrant workers in Samut Sakhon willingly make donations or do charity work in Buddhist temples. Gender is a prevalent factor the pattern of actions regarding religious participation as gender relations are elemental features of cultural institutions created by patterns of valued socialised through social practices (Vertovec, 2009). As observed, Myanmar women in Samut Sakhon participate and engage in the religious events more than men do. The level of social connectedness varies between genders which is consistent with Putnam's claim that "the density of informal social connections varies somewhat, as we noticed earlier, among different social categories-higher among women than among men" (2000, 107) and "women have traditionally invested more time than men in social connectedness" (2000, 195). Putnam's arguments corroborate the situation of religious engagement of Myanmar female workers in Samut Sakhon.

## Conclusion

Myanmar migrant workers in Samut Sakhon are religious in terms of supporting religious activities at temples and donate a lot of money in comparison to their income. The Wat Noi Nang Hong Association is the informal Myanmar migrant workers network in this region. The association offers a space where Myanmar migrant workers can maintain and express their religious beliefs while living overseas. First and foremost, the rationale to support temple activities and give donations is that they believe that if they do good things, these deeds will pay off. Therefore, many Myanmar migrant workers have faith that if they donate a lot of money, their life in present as well as their next life will be comfortable. It also provides donors the opportunity to make friends within the temple, to help others, and, admittedly, to show off personal wealth. Symbolic capital is also accrued by Myanmar members of an informal network particularly at religious events. Making donations and specific forms of dress are some of the ways members of the Wat Noi Hang association produce and gain symbolic and social capital.

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