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Living with Four Polities: States and Cross-border Flows in the Myanmar-Thailand Borderland

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Living with Four Polities: States and Cross-Border Flows in the Myanmar-Thailand Borderland aims to disentangle the multifaceted borderscape of one of Asia's most dynamic borderlands. Based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork on the border between Myanmar's southern Shan State and northwest Thailand, this dissertation reveals this borderland to be a distinctive case representing the complexity resulting from a specific history of state transformation. The meeting of state border control and cross-border communities does not result in an absolute restriction to the flows of people or commodity across the border.

Rather, the dialectics of border security and the permeability of the border are highlighted. This work illuminates the attempts of state and non-state actors to stringently demarcate the border results in an increase in the rescaling of the border by border communities in order to maintain their mobility and the porosity of the border.

LIVING WITH FOUR POLITIES
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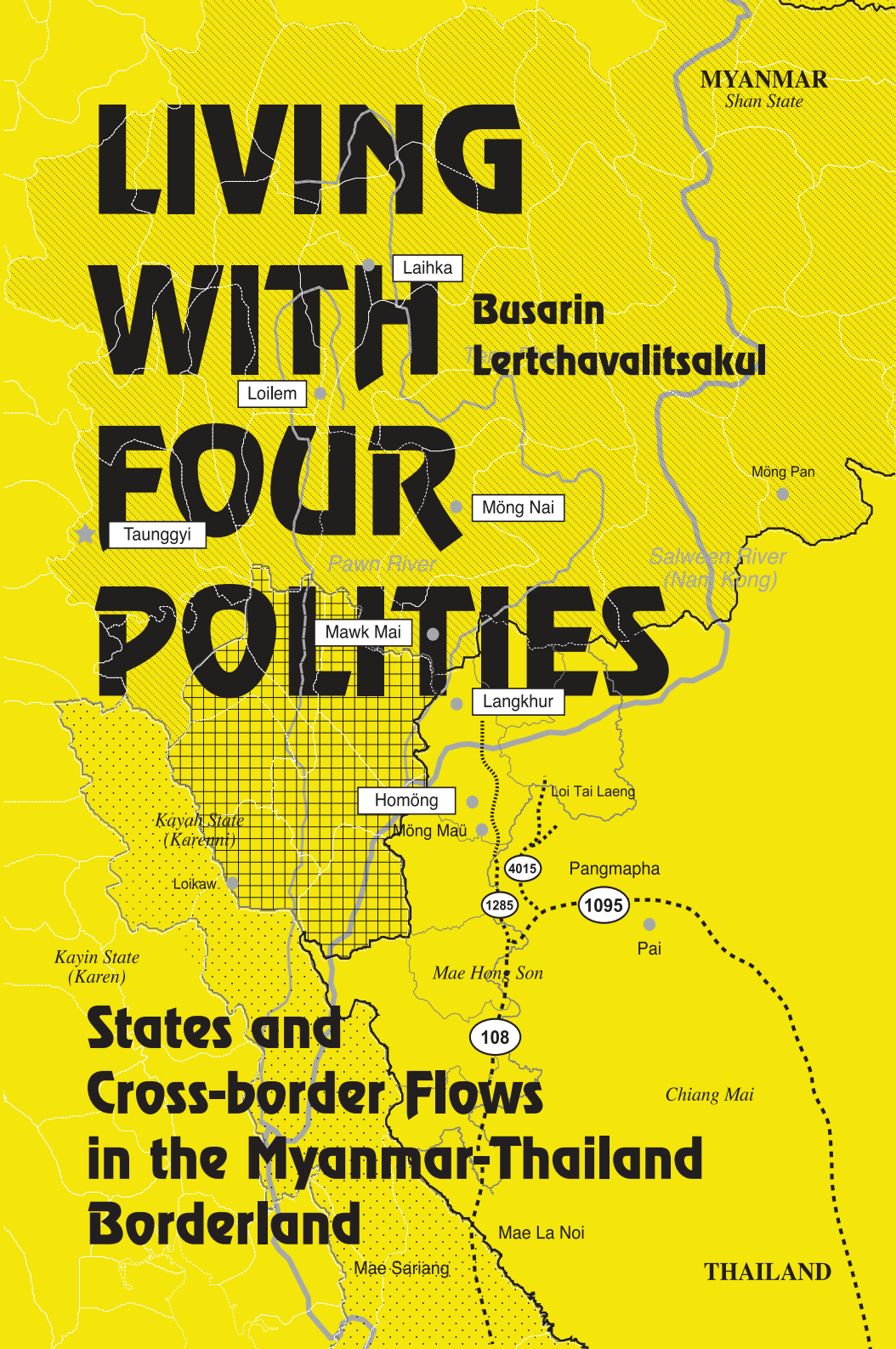

SUMMARY

Living with Four Polities: States and Cross-border Flows in the Myanmar-Thailand Borderland aims to disentangle the multifaceted borderscape of one of Asia's most dynamic borderlands. Based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork on the border between Myanmar's southern Shan State and northwest Thailand, this dissertation illuminates the intersection of cross-border mobility and border control within the highly complex interactions of various state and state-like actors. This specific area of the Myanmar-Thailand borderland accommodates a variety of political elites whose influence extends beyond the borders of the two nation-states. With varying levels of efficiency and success, the elites attempt to exercise their power to maintain sovereignty and control the population living in their territories, while also seeking to claim shares of the benefits of resource extraction.

The four main polities operating in this borderland include the Thai state, the Myanmar state, a powerful border elite referred to as the 'Maha Ja family,' and an armed ethnic insurgent group, the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S). For the past several decades, these elites have contested to claim spatial control. Meanwhile, the influence of state-like polities have reduced the authority of the nation-states, despite the proliferation of state regulations for the management of border affairs and an increase in international state-based cooperation throughout the world. This work's primary contribution to the field of borderland studies is its detailed description of how the political boundaries of non-state actors can come to be more significant to the daily lives of cross-border communities than those of nation-states.

This work presents the evolution of border control measures through the framework of three successive regimes operating in the Myanmar-Thailand borderlands—namely, frontier, border, and mobility. The conceptual lens of the 'regime' allows for an emphasis on the different characteristics of border control protocols that have developed on both sides of the border. The three regimes are understood as implemented forms of ideologies of regulations, procedures, agreements with border communities, and informal strategies initiated by social actors on the ground. State and state-like actors create and strengthen their political boundaries through creation of 'strategic spaces' and attempts to outwit one another, while seeking to control cross-border mobility through the promulgation and enforcement of arbitrary rules. However, people on the ground do not consistently acquiesce to such regulations. Rather, they seek ways to negotiate and outwit the structural powers in order to utilize cross-border mobility to gainfully navigate various political boundaries and nation-state borders over time.

State formation and transformation in this borderland during the past five decades are extensively discussed. This work views the state as a dynamic institution that is often inconsistent and arbitrary. At the same time, state-like polities—the Maha Ja family and the SSA-S, in this case—manage to exercise their authority to control cross-border mobility, similar to states. The four polities, therefore, occasionally stand in opposition to one another, but also hold similar political stances and share in the economic benefits of the borderlands when opportunities allow. The resulting structural forces subsequently encourage cross-border communities to negotiate with the polities using diverse means, such as gifting, commodity exchange, and bribery, as well as direct manipulation of state regulations.

State performance is another facet examined in this research in order to understand how state regulations are written, and how state officials at the ground level implement laws and regulations as part of the regular performance of their duties. Through the study of documents, provincial orders, and guidelines disseminated by Thai state officials attempting to manage the border, this dissertation asserts that officials strive to adopt the ideology of the modern nation-state as they carry out their duties as 'mundane state activities.' With regard to documentation, classification of border-crossers, collection of data on people traveling, and commodities traded across the border, the officials' actions and duties emphasize border control under the 'border regime,' which is based on the ideology of the modern nation-state. Furthermore, the procedures of border control—including fingerprinting and photographing border crossers and screening of personal belongings—are meant to constitute 'surveillance by regulations.' The bodies of border-crossers, their personal belongings, and their commodities are scrutinized, reflecting an aspect of the 'mobility regime,' under which people's ethnicity, identity, and habits of consumption are seen to impact border security and integrity.

The interaction of state performance and the cross-border mobility of migrants, including traders with commodities, has led the latter to develop adaptive strategies to move people and commodities across political boundaries and the borders of nation-states. Beyond gifting, commodity exchanges, and bribery as common practices, the diversification of meanings of commodities in small-scale trade during encounters with state regulations is also common. Cross-border traders and labor migrants give new meanings to, or shift existing social and cultural meanings of, particular commodities in order to allow for their continued mobility. This dissertation's investigation of cross-border flows renders a new way to investigate this social phenomena by considering commodities as creators of 'social lives.' This research argues that upon crossing the border and encountering state regulations, people and commodities have the potential to either support or obstruct one another as a consequence of their attached meanings.

Another aim of this dissertation is to provide a new aspect to the study of contemporary human migration. Shan migrants from Myanmar's Shan State are the predominant ethnic population to be researched in this work. Over the past five decades, they have shifted their principal form of cross-border mobility from that of small-scale traders to labor migrants living and working throughout the whole of Thailand. This work attempts to fill a void in migration studies by employing the framework of a 'transnational network.' Inspired by 'mobility turns,' this dissertation further tackles the question of how Shan migrants have managed to diversify their forms of mobility to suit their desired patterns of migration. It argues that Shan migrants have continually succeeded in crossing political boundaries and nation-state borders amidst the attempts of the four polities to restrict cross-border mobility. One way they have achieved this outcome is by depending on cross-border traders as intermediaries in coordinating and facilitating their migratory trajectories. This practice has created a common migration pattern that reflects 'social change' or 'social transformation,' developed from redrawn and rescaled boundaries under three successive regimes of border control—frontier, border, and mobility.

In conclusion, this dissertation reveals the Myanmar-Thailand borderland to be a distinctive case representing the complexity resulting from a specific history of state transformation. The meeting of state border control and cross-border communities does not result in an absolute restriction to the flows of people or commodity across the border. Rather, the dialectics of border security and the permeability of the border are highlighted. This research reveals that the attempts of state and non-state actors to stringently demarcate the border results in an increase in the rescaling of the border by border communities in order to maintain their mobility and the porosity of the border.