

Education-Led Mobility Under Structural Ceiling: Social Capital and Shan Migrant University Graduates in Urban Chiang Mai

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Abstract

This paper examines how Shan migrants from Myanmar who completed university-level education in urban Chiang Mai, Thailand, mobilize education and social capital to pursue employment and social mobility. While higher education is often understood as a pathway to upward mobility, the paper shows that university achievement alone does not automatically produce secure employment, full recognition, or stable inclusion in the host society. For Shan migrant youth, education creates important possibilities, but these possibilities remain shaped by social relationships and constrained by their position as migrants in Thai society.

Drawing on semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in 2025 with 20 Shan migrants from Myanmar who completed university-level education in Chiang Mai and were selected through purposive sampling, the paper presents three findings. First, education generated language skills, credentials, confidence, wider aspirations, and the ability to imagine futures beyond low-paid migrant work. Second, social capital helped participants convert these educational gains into opportunities. Family members, teachers, community-based organizations, religious institutions, employers, peers, and senior migrants supported access to scholarships, institutional recognition, employment connections, advice, and emotional support. Third, the mobility produced through education and social capital was meaningful but partial. Participants experienced occupational improvement, stronger confidence, greater recognition, and increased ability to support families and communities. However, migrant status continued to shape how their education, skills, and capacities were recognized in workplaces and everyday interactions.

The paper argues that Shan migrant graduates experience education-led mobility through networked conversion under structural ceilings. Their educational achievements and social networks enabled movement, but legal-status insecurity, documentation instability, labor-market segmentation, and political disruption in Myanmar continued to limit how far that mobility could go. It contributes to Burma/Myanmar Studies and Development Studies by showing that migrant youth actively pursue advancement, yet their mobility remains partial because opportunities and recognition continue to be shaped by migrant status.