

Shan Monks, Forced Migration, and Cross-Border Religious Mobility in the Myanmar–Thailand Borderlands: Navigating Buddhist Institutional Networks across Shan State and Chiang Mai

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Abstract

This paper examines cross-border religious mobility in the Myanmar–Thailand borderlands by focusing on how Shan monks navigate Buddhist institutional networks across Shan State and Chiang Mai under conditions shaped by displacement and forced migration. It argues that monastic mobility should not be understood simply as an extension of migrant social networks, but as a process actively shaped through monks' engagement with institutional arrangements that regulate access to movement, education, and residence across borders.

Based on historical research and ethnographic fieldwork conducted with the Tai-Association at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (Chiang Mai Campus), the study analyzes how Shan monks engage with monasteries, religious education programs, and lay-supported initiatives to pursue opportunities for study and residence in northern Thailand. These institutional settings provide access to training, accommodation, and support systems that enable monks to sustain cross-border mobility and religious life.

Such forms of movement emerge within conditions associated with forced migration, including restricted educational access, militarization, and prolonged instability in Myanmar. However, the mobility of Shan monks does not conform neatly to conventional distinctions between voluntary migration and forced displacement. Instead, it reflects negotiated pathways through which monks navigate institutional structures that both enable and constrain their movement.

Focusing on everyday practices within monastic and educational environments in Chiang Mai, the paper demonstrates how Shan monks reshape relations of authority, belonging, and legitimacy through their participation in cross-border religious life. Mobility, in this sense, extends beyond physical relocation to encompass shifts in social positioning within religious and institutional contexts spanning both sides of the border.

By foregrounding the ways in which Shan monks navigate Buddhist institutional networks, this paper offers a reoriented perspective on borderland migration in the Myanmar–Thailand context. It highlights how religious actors actively shape and sustain cross-border mobility under conditions of forced migration.