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Living liminally: Migrant children living in the Myanmar-Thailand border region

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Abstract

This article focuses on the perils and potential opportunities for children living as forced migrants in the transnational borderland between Myanmar and Thailand. During decades of armed conflict and economic ruin, millions of children and families from Myanmar have been displaced internally or forced to emigrate to Thailand and China. For migrant Myanmar children living in Thailand, lack of identity documentation, social protection and education are prevalent. Often stateless and disconnected from their families, communities and cultures of origin and excluded from institutional affiliations, they live perched on the edge of society in a liminal state. Despite their vulnerability, however, the conditions of liminality may also instil unique orientations to the world as transmigrants, with skills that equip them to cope with a high degree of uncertainty and hardship and to adapt nimbly to future stresses and opportunities in a globalized world. This article proposes an innovative programme of research that challenges foundational theories of child development and views these children as actively engaged in meaning-making and as carriers of globalization.

Keywords

Forced migration, transnational migration, circulating children, globalization, Myanmar, Thailand, Karen, statelessness, child development, identity

Introduction

Children who have migrated for political, economic, religious or social reasons are a uniquely marginalized and vulnerable population. Since the military took control of Myanmar (formerly Burma) in 1962, millions of Myanmar children and families have fled their homeland to neighbouring Thailand and China, in the face of sustained economic hardship, oppression and persecution of ethnic minorities by the military dictatorship. Thailand shares a 2401-km border with Myanmar and has been host to a steady flow of refugees, migrants and other displaced children and families, with a significantly increased influx following military crackdowns on civil resistance

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movements in Myanmar in the late 1980s. In 2013, the Thailand Ministry of Labour estimated that there were about 2.5 million migrant workers in Thailand (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2014). Many of these workers have children born in Thailand or in their home country, and there are an unknown number of unaccompanied – and often undocumented – migrant children. While many families are economic migrants, searching for work in factories and farms, there is also a significant forced migrant population originating from ethnolinguistic minority groups in the border states of Myanmar that have been involved in armed conflict with the military government for over 30 years. They have fled from violence, detention, arrest and internal displacement, seeking to sustain their families in villages and towns in the borderland between Myanmar and Thailand.

World Education estimates that there are 200,000–400,000 migrant children in Thailand (ILO, 2014), and the Myanmar Education Integration Initiative estimates between 300,000 and 600,000 migrant children living in Thailand (Migrant Education Integration Initiative (MEII), 2013). An unknown number of them are migrant children from Myanmar, residing in the border area. In some instances, children arrive unaccompanied: some are sent by their families in search of safety and education, some are kidnapped and some become separated from their family during forced migration (Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights (Burma), 2009). This article focuses on the circumstances, experiences and prospects of displaced children born to Myanmar parents who are forced migrants living on the Thai side of the eastern border of Myanmar. Our analysis is guided by the concept of 'liminal living'. What do we mean by this? 'Liminal' refers to ambiguity and in-between-ness, intermediate between two or more states, conditions or regions. It also refers to being in transition, or suspended in a transitional time and space, permeated by sustained indeterminacy. More concretely, children who live without permanent, official documentation of identity that verifies their name and ties them to a nation-state; who live largely in the company of people who are not part of their family or community of origin; and whose place of residence and sustenance is highly uncertain could be said to be living liminally. They are perched on the territorial and social edges of mainstream society, visible only on the periphery of institutions that typically support childhoods, such as health clinics and hospitals, nurseries, preschools, formal schools, child protection agencies and law enforcement.

While migrants from Myanmar may come to Thailand seeking security and certainty about their future, in fact their lives are most often characterized by lack of social protection and uncertainty. Most are visible to social institutions in only the most transitory ways, as temporary visitors or asylum seekers without roots or a future in Thailand. They are, in effect, a liminal body. Nuanced accounts from Myanmar migrants are rare (e.g. Jirattikorn, 2012) within the larger scholarly literature about transnational migrants. Even less is known about the experiences and meaning-making of circulating Myanmar children living in the border region. Most studies of migration and mobility construct migrant children's experiences as epiphenomena – secondary consequences of their parents' primary stories of migration. Yet, children are impacted as much by their mobility as adults. This particular population of children lives poised on a number of intersecting edges that may be both perilous and productive for their development. Although few have played an active role as instigators of their migration, in order to survive and thrive, they must actively engage in making sense of their circumstances by learning new skills to adapt to them and constructing meanings that yield coherence and a sense of purpose in their lives. There is much that can be learned about processes of meaning-making from children's accounts of their everyday experiences.

This article provides an overview of the conditions that sustain this state of liminality that seems to characterize the lives of children in the Myanmar-Thailand borderland and charts a programme of research through which these children's experiences can be meaningfully understood. In doing so, we explore the possibility that the ability of some children to cope with and even capitalize on their experiences as forced migrants could help us understand childhood in a changing, globalized world.

The following discussion is based on the first author's exploratory conversations with youth living in or attending day school in non-formal migrant learning centres in Mae Sot in Tak province, Thailand. The goal of this initial visit was to assess the needs and goals of migrant Myanmar youth with a view to formulating a programme of research and identifying avenues for future service support and advocacy. Among the six provinces with high numbers of Myanmar migrants, Tak province and specifically the area around Mae Sot have the largest populations of Myanmar migrants. Direct observation, conversational interviews and informal group discussions were held with migrant Myanmar youth aged 10–17 years and their caregivers and teachers at eight non-formal, migrant learning centres in and around the town of Mae Sot in Tak province, Thailand. Invitations to visit the learning centres were secured by a representative of BEAM (Bridging Educational Access to Migrants) Education Foundation (2014). BEAM was created by migrant Myanmar teachers in 2009 to assist with the unmet needs of Myanmar migrant children and youth seeking education that will prepare them for eventually entering a formal education system or vocational training programmes. The BEAM representative explained the purpose of the author's visit and obtained informed consent from youth aged 10–17 years, their caregivers and teachers for brief conversations about their life experiences and aspirations. The author did not speak a language of Thailand or Myanmar: for children and adults who wished to share their experiences but who did not speak English, the BEAM representative provided translation.

Background

About 120,000 Myanmar refugees, including an unknown number of children, currently live in nine temporary shelters (refugee camps) on the Thai side of the Thailand-Myanmar border (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2014). Some asylum seekers from Myanmar have been the beneficiaries of international resettlement programmes and are now living in third countries. In this article, we focus on children who are part of the influx of migrants from Myanmar living outside of the context of refugee camps and the protections, services and risks that these refugee camps afford. Most children arriving from Myanmar to Thailand, or who are born to Myanmar parents living in Thailand, do not have refugee status and live as undocumented, temporary residents of border towns, villages and orphanages. For example, the town of Mae Sot in Tak Province, bordering Myanmar's eastern borders, has a population of about 106,000 Myanmar migrants recorded in the official census and an estimated 100,000 additional undocumented Myanmar migrants. A similar influx of Myanmar migrants has resulted in a burgeoning population in the province of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand.[1]

Beginning in 2011, the Myanmar government began a political shift from military dictatorship with closed national borders to democratic processes and open borders. The government has begun to introduce comprehensive reforms to jumpstart development, with the stated goal of introducing public services, economic opportunities and open civil society commensurate with other member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[2] What was once a rigidly insular country is opening up to tourists, foreign investors and humanitarian aid organizations. Expatriates, including political refugees and migrants in Thailand and China, have been encouraged to return home.

These initiatives seem to forecast the end of five decades of authoritarian rule and as many years of human rights violations, particularly targeting ethnic minority groups in the eastern part of the country. However, the transition is slow and anything but steady. Notwithstanding, seeing the political transition under way in Myanmar, the government of Thailand and other emigration destinations are re-evaluating their policies towards Myanmar migrants, viewing them more as migrants by choice rather than refugees fleeing a brutal regime. International resettlement opportunities are beginning to

shrink, support from international donors for temporary shelters and services is diminishing and the government of Thailand is recalibrating investments in the well-being of Myanmar children and families, including the provision of schooling to those undocumented migrant Myanmar children who have been able to access it. Government and non-government organizations now expect many migrants to return to Myanmar.

Despite recent changes in their home country, many migrants living along the border with Thailand remain wary about their prospects for safety, security, social inclusion, education and employment if they return to Myanmar. Recently negotiated cease-fire agreements between ethnic groups and the military are perceived by many as tenuous. As well, many villages and homes belonging to ethnic minorities have been destroyed, and loss of land and possessions, lack of jobs and lingering animosities in their home states are deterrents to migrants' successful return. Today, migrating to Thailand has been and continues to be a critical survival or livelihood strategy for many ethnically minoritized families originating in Myanmar in the face of ongoing political conflict or uneasy peace, social discrimination and economic hardship.

Conditions of liminality for migrant children in the borderland

Migrant Myanmar youth living in Mae Sot are living between two countries that are themselves in perpetual modes of transition. As noted above, Myanmar is emerging from decades of isolation and appears to have embarked on an unsteady transition to democracy. The border region of Thailand is undergoing a transition as well, as donor agencies have begun to decrease support for refugees and undocumented migrants in anticipation of some segment of this population returning to Myanmar as conditions in that country improve. Fluctuating geopolitical landscapes directly impact migrant Myanmar children living in Thailand in a number of ways. This section describes significant features that distinctly contribute to the liminal state of Myanmar migrants.

Statelessness

Statelessness is thought to affect upwards of 10 million people around the world (UNHCR, 2012b), although this number is approximate because in many ways this population is effectively invisible. While there is a growing literature on the experiences of children and youth who have official refugee status, few studies have explored the problem of *de facto* (effectively stateless due to on the ground reality) and *de jure* statelessness (stateless due to laws or state policy) among infants, children or youth (Lynch, 2010). What is known is that deprivation of nationality can occur as the result of unwillingness on the part of the state to recognize children of parents displaced by armed conflict or as a result of deliberate state policy not to confer nationality on children born to people of certain ethnicity or religion. This is the predicament of an estimated half to two-thirds of migrant Myanmar children who are living and may have been born in Thailand, do not have refugee status and are often unaccompanied by their birth parents (UNHCR, 2012a). Statelessness can also result from a number of other negative antecedents: never having one's birth registered, fleeing without bringing along legal documents, confiscation of legal documents at border crossings or during detention, and other circumstances. Statelessness prevents freedom of movement across international borders and can become a permanent obstacle to repatriation or legal migration to a third country. It also results in a host of lifelong difficulties, including being unable to enrol in school, be legally employed or legally married and be eligible for government assistance programmes, to name a few.

Identity documentation

In some instances, statelessness results from or overlaps with a lack of identity documentation, typically in the form of birth registration. Identity documentation is a crucial first step towards accessing social protection provided by the state (UNHCR, 2012b). Despite commitments to Education for All (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1990), many schools in Thailand require identity documents when a child seeks to enrol. Similarly, Myanmar schools require evidence of a child's Myanmar identity and right to enrol in a Myanmar school, especially if they are arriving from outside the country. Furthermore, children without identity documentation are at great risk of identity falsification and being trafficked or sold into hazardous work or criminal activities, or forcibly recruited into military service. For children who are aware of the importance of birth registration and other forms of identity documentation, their inability to produce identity documents can increase an already anxiety-provoking sense of uncertainty about their prospects for social integration into Myanmar, Thailand or any country.

Recognizing lack of identity documentation as a persistent source of uncertainty and unfulfilled rights for a number of Myanmar children, organizations operated by Myanmar migrants for the migrant community, such as BEAM Education Foundation (2014), try to help children to acquire Myanmar identity documents. They are motivated in part by the goal of facilitating migrant children's reintegration into the school system in Myanmar. Other organizations help children to acquire Thailand identity documents with the expectation that they will integrate into Thai society as citizens. While children who meet certain eligibility criteria are able to apply for Thai citizenship, many families and migrant community organizations children choose not to pursue this option because children would lose their Myanmar identity and chance for reintegration as Myanmar citizens. Migrant organizations try to obtain identity documentation for children; however, even with the help of charitable organizations, some barriers to obtaining official birth documentation are insurmountable under current policy regimes in both Thailand and Myanmar. This is especially the case for second-generation stateless children whose mother and/or father do not have documents officially recognizing them as citizens of either country, or children who are orphaned or whose parents cannot be contacted.

Mobility

Children living along the border are a highly mobile population. They may be part of families that move frequently for a host of reasons, including the need to move to avoid arrest, detention, and deportation; to seek work wherever an opportunity appears to be emerging; to avoid persecution by gangs involved in drug or human trafficking; to seek reunification with other members of the family or ethnolinguistic community; and so on. Some children accompany adult family members who move back and forth across the border frequently, even daily, as they collect and transport items to sell – from farm produce to sex to drugs. Some children are kidnapped or recruited to work as drug 'mules', repeatedly crossing the border to smuggle drugs from Myanmar to Thailand. Some children move in order to attend different schools or to benefit from outreach by various charities offering them residential care or education. Some children are kidnapped or recruited as sex workers and may move into urban centres temporarily or permanently, while others escape from these situations and move out of urban centres to villages close to the border.

Materiality

A striking feature of life for most migrant children in the border region is the cramped, communal and minimalist nature of the material environment. Children often sit two to a chair or five to a

bench in crowded classrooms, sharing one book or writing tablet among them. Children are often engaged in activities as a collective, for example, reciting textbook passages and chanting meditations in unison, napping in unison on long log-shaped pillows and shared mats, eating in unison, sleeping in dormitories with limited personal space, sharing domestic and farm work together, going together in groups to sell items in the market and so on. Functional items such as clothing, books, eating utensils and school supplies may be exchanged daily among peers. Functional spaces may be used interchangeably. For example, a schoolroom may also serve throughout the day as an assembly hall, a prayer room and a dormitory. In schools, residential spaces and vehicles, there is typically co-mingling of children and adults of all ages along with pets, livestock, farm produce, and containers of water, gasoline, cooking oil and so on. In short, childhoods in the liminal spaces inhabited by most migrant children in the borderland are not ordered and structured according to discrete functionalities or demarcated according to personal ownership, as would be characteristic in the material lives of many children in more sedentary circumstances.

Liminal education

Education is another sphere in which migrant Myanmar children in Thailand exist only marginally: many Myanmar children in Thailand have difficulties gaining access to formal or non-formal education. It is difficult to estimate the number of migrant Myanmar children who are never enrolled in any education programme; however, some estimates suggest that less than 20% of migrant children attend school of any kind (ILO, 2014). Children living in refugee camps are not free to enrol in Thai government schools, but generally have access to some form of non-formal education. However, as noted, support for refugee services including non-formal education is waning. In addition to barriers associated with refugee status or lack of identity documentation, other obstacles to migrant children enrolling in Thai schools include a prevalent lack of school records of their achievement; the incommensurability of the Thai, Myanmar, and alternative education systems; and Myanmar children not being able to understand, read or write Thai, which is the medium of instruction in Thai schools. Other factors include large numbers of children and families who lack the information, confidence and means to enrol their children in Thai schools.

When Thai schools do open their doors to Myanmar children, they often do not recognize children's prior academic achievement, requiring them to enrol in lower grades than their age-mates and thereby creating a disincentive for parents to enrol their children and for children's motivation to attend regularly. Furthermore, it is a policy of the Thailand Ministry of Education (2014), Office of the Basic Education Commission, that students are installed with imperial loyalty and pride in Thainess: Thai schools require children daily to pledge allegiance to the Thai monarchy and nationality. This pressure to assimilate may be another disincentive for parents and children who wish to retain their Myanmar identity; for many, their ultimate goal is to return to Myanmar and claim their rights to Myanmar identity and entitlements. As well, many families are hesitant to become involved in Thai institutions for fear that this may make them vulnerable to being arrested, detained or deported as illegal aliens (Burmese Migrant Workers' Education Committee, 2014). Given recent peace treaties negotiated in Myanmar, the Thai government is hard-pressed to continue to welcome migrant Myanmar children who are seen as now having the choice to enrol in schools in Myanmar.

Developmental trajectories of circulating children: Suggestions for a programme of research

This section aims to contribute to contemporary discourse about the process of child development among circulating children. There is much to learn about the nature of childhood, resilience,

resistance and children's capacity for identity formation from the varied accounts of circulating children. James and James (2008) famously countervened established understandings of child development as a fixed sequence of benchmarks requiring a minimum set of necessary conditions, pointing to the embeddedness of constructions of childhood in particular social, cultural and historical contexts. As the world that children are born into becomes increasingly globalized and mobility across borders, cultures, social classes, sexualities, genders and other imagined categories that have historically defined identities becomes more mutable, where should we look to understand experiences and trajectories of childhood? In this section, we sketch the contours of a programme of ethnographic research that focuses on the everyday lives and narratives of children involved in forced migration for political, economic or social reasons.

Migrant children's constructions of childhood

Lan and Huijsmans (2014) point out that, to date, ethnographic literature about Southeast Asia, unlike elsewhere, is adult-centric. Efforts to examine migrant children's lives from their own perspectives can yield more nuanced and multidimensional narratives than the interpretations and scripts constructed from adult-centred approaches (Van Blerk, 2006).

Research in various social sciences has seriously challenged the 'global model of childhood' (Ansell, 2005: 23). Given the prevalence of peer socialization and child-to-child care in the borderland, it would be useful to hear from girls and boys involved in forced migration about how they conceptualize childhood and the conditions for satisfactory child development. How do they perceive their own early years as migrants? Do they see themselves as having a childhood? How is it signified? Has childhood ended for them? If so, when and why did it end? If they are no longer children, how do they define themselves now in terms of their development or life trajectory?

Identity formation in volatile circumstances

In addition to highlighting the abundant deficits and risks of childhoods lived as migrants in the borderland, we also seek to draw attention to the undiscussed strengths of children who have managed to survive and thrive under harsh conditions. Despite their general lack of stability, resources and formal education, those migrant children who have managed to thrive against all odds as undocumented and often unaccompanied aliens in Thailand undoubtedly have developed adaptive skills that could enable them to be highly functional denizens in an ever-globalizing world. For example, many have learned to speak multiple languages, work cooperatively and live in close quarters with a heterogeneous mix of people, learn new skills, solve problems creatively and eke out a living using ingenuity and persistence. These children may have developed loyalties to Thailand as the place that has afforded them a place to live without having their home burned down, to Myanmar as an imagined place where their ancestors lived and their larger ethnolinguistic community is situated and to other countries as imagined places where volunteers come from and some members of their community may have resettled. How do different children manage their different multiple identities? Is multiple identity a source of stress or anxiety for all children, or for some children is multiple identity a developmental challenge that, when successfully managed on a daily basis, stimulates enhanced metacognitive development and an ability to flexibly adapt to ambiguity and to multiple and competing role demands?

Current constructions of child migration experiences and policies built up around them tend to reflect dominant notions of victimhood and psychological trauma (Davidson and Farrow, 2007), as if children born outside their parents' country of origin or caught up in forced migration are forever passive, devoid of agency and unable to take a meaningful role in decision-making about their

future mobility and migration. Yet, it seems equally possible that some children's experiences of migration would stimulate psychological capacities such as emotional self-regulation, metacognition, independent decision-making, role taking, attention and persistence. Based on ethnographic study of children displaced by conflict, Boyden and De Berry (2004) were among the first to question the presumed universal vulnerability and victimization of displaced children. Adequate attention to the multidimensional nature and variability of child migration experiences may help us to appreciate that agency and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive (Ensor, 2010). Both processes may manifest themselves concurrently to varying degrees depending on children's characteristics and the particularities of conditions for their wellness and development. As long as we attend only to the absence of the conditions for normative development constructed in foundational theories elaborated in the mid-20th century as essential, we may overlook compensatory or concurrent conditions that enable children to survive and grow and at the same time fail to look for disconfirming feedback about the universal validity of foundational theories of child development.

There are many other questions that could be explored in studies of circulating children's development narratives. For example, have foundational theories, such as ethological theory, overstated certain requirements for development such as the necessity of secure attachments to consistent adult caregivers? Can a handful of adults caring for a few hundred youngsters in a residential care facility provide sufficiently consistent expressions of care to enable the kind of internalized positive self-regard described by psychodynamic theory as essential for emotional self-regulation and resilience? If so, under what conditions? Can care provided by an older child to a young child serve the same function? Can inclusion in a community of several hundred children in a residential setting provide enough of a sense of social belonging for a child to tether their sense of self to a place in the social world? What is the contribution of domestic labour and work to provide sustenance for oneself and others to migrant children's sense of self-worth and their hope for their future? Does living liminally necessarily inhibit a child's capacity to consolidate a coherent and sustained sense of self, as stage theories of psychosocial development posit, or can living liminally actually enhance a child's capacity to be resilient, resourceful, nimble and courageous in the face of uncertainty and change – that is, in conditions that are themselves liminal? If so, under what circumstances and for children with what predispositions? What are the relative gains and losses of this kind of developmental trajectory? With greater appreciation for the demands on children to develop in liminal conditions and greater insights into how they navigate their own development in such circumstances, we would be better positioned to support circulating children in extremely difficult situations and to harness their strengths and potential in education and community life. Repatriation, integration and resettlement programmes could be better prepared to engage with them in assessing their capacities, goals and needs.

Children's meaning-making in the project of nation-building

A programme of research seeking insights into how migrant children's lives are constituted, how they perceive their own childhoods, how they construct meanings relating to their circumstances and how they imagine themselves into the future inside or outside of their country of origin would be a unique, generational approach that is timely as Myanmar is reconstructing itself. For example, how will returning migrant children's identifications with their own childhood experiences, families, history, cultures, ethnicities and nation reproduce or recalibrate the inequalities they or their families experienced before they left Myanmar and while they were living as aliens in neighbouring countries? Children growing up in towns, villages and institutions outside the refugee camps are more likely to interact with a wide range of people, including Thai nationals of various ethnicities and heterogeneous Myanmar migrants. To what extent do these migrant Myanmar children

identify with their heritage ethnic group and language? What is their sense of ethnic identity relative to their sense of Thai or Myanmar national identity?

Anderson (2006) described nations as 'imagined communities'. For migrant Myanmar children living in the border region, their community is often permeable and mutable: other children come and go from their peer group, learning centre community or residential institution; there is often interaction with local Thai nationals in and nearby their community; a host of local and international volunteers come and go, and they themselves may reside in a sequence of different community groupings and belong to a sequence of different school communities during their childhoods. How does a child in these circumstances orient their social identity? Furthermore, these children may cross back and forth to Myanmar frequently to rejoin families and villagers temporarily. For them, the physical border demarking nations may seem as permeable or as irrelevant as the borders around their transient social communities. Where do they perceive their community to be located, if anywhere?

Glick Schiller et al. (1995) encourage us to consider that transmigrants' 'public identities are configured in relation to more than one nation-state' (p. 48). What can we learn from these children about the project of constructing a nation, which is the project that is perhaps the most pressing for Myanmar as it undergoes radical reform? How do these children perceive Myanmar and how do they imagine their lives changing if they return to Myanmar? What do they anticipate will be the role of the nation-state and local state governments in their lives, and what aspects of this influence would be welcomed or unwelcomed? What are the dimensions of continuity and discontinuity that they anticipate if they return to Myanmar versus remaining in Thailand? What do they think these continuities or changes will mean for their own identities, wellness, social belonging and life opportunities? Are they to be welcomed or resisted? On the other side of the border, how are the young people who have been living as exiles or born abroad perceived by citizens and by government bodies in Myanmar? What assets and risks do they signify if they return?

Novel forms of childhood in a globalized world

Anecdotal reports and observations illustrating children's agency, resilience and capacity to care for themselves and others in similarly precarious circumstances point to certain kinds of opportunities and supports that seem to enable many children to persevere or even thrive. Observing children in some of the largely child-run children's villages in Mae Sot, for example, it seemed that some of the older children may have been gaining certain freedoms and satisfactions from their emancipated locations. As well, few if any of these children have been exposed to a monocultural life; rather, most of the children in these settings are exposed to multiple cultures and have become multilingual, giving them access to the knowledges embedded in languages and the opportunities that come with being proficient in Thai as well as one or more languages of Myanmar. Many children are proficient in negotiating two or more sets of cultural expectations; for example, children as young as 5 years old may venture beyond their place of residence into eclectic public spaces such as marketplaces, where they may sell garden produce grown in their children's village or learning centre. Many migrant learning centres have income-generating projects such as the cultivation of edible mushrooms, beans, fish and other produce, and manufacture of articles of clothing, hand-woven cloth, brooms and baskets. These forays allow them a window onto the world of commerce and familiarity with Thai and other cultural forms of social interaction. Children allowed by the Thai government to enrol in public schools are arguably exposed to teaching and learning opportunities superior to those they would have experienced in Myanmar. Some of the environments in which these children live are highly diverse and dynamic and are often more cosmopolitan than towns and villages in the border states of Myanmar. Thus, living liminally offers some

migrant children a vibrant environment socially, culturally and linguistically, while at the same time lacking in basic human rights, stability and material supports. These children may be more equipped than most to adapt and flourish in an increasingly globalized world. That said, we do not wish to overstate the richness of their environs – these children face unequivocally significant burdens, and whatever opportunities they may capitalize on are ones they have largely constructed for themselves as part of their unique developmental trajectory. While these forced migrant children may be able to occupy multiple spaces with little supervision or constraints, their independence is complicated by high need. Most of these children are also growing up in extreme poverty, with serious gaps in nutrition, health and dental care; quality early childhood education; and social protection and with learning environments that are not conducive to optimal cognitive attention, effort, individualized instruction, gentle discipline, or learning through exploration, experimentation, collaboration or play.

Many migrant learning centres, institutions and families provide opportunities for migrant children to engage in ethnocultural celebrations and Buddhist practices associated with their Myanmar heritage. These transplanted traditions may help migrant children find a balance between old and new or to engage in hybrid cultural practices that are meaningful in the space between two worlds and that may provide an external impetus for an internal elaboration of hybrid, or transmigrant, identity. For these children, resiliency – the ability to recover from trauma, tolerate uncertainty and adapt to change – is critical to survive and thrive. Bhabha (1994) articulated the 'in-between' as a 'terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity', a position that resists fixity (p. 1). The children living on the Myanmar-Thailand border in multi-ethnic and sometimes bi-national communities would seem to epitomize this fundamental indeterminacy in terms of their external and perhaps also their psychological identity. Research that explores questions outlined in this article could illuminate adaptation strategies and shed light on a potentially novel expression of childhood in the globalized world.

Conclusion

This article has taken a generational perspective, emphasizing the liminal conditions for survival, growth and development of young migrants from Myanmar. For most – though not all – Myanmar children living along the Thai border, their circulation or migratory journeys are located in political conflict. Most belong to distinctive ethnolinguistic communities that, for the past several decades, have been institutionally minoritized and politically excluded within Myanmar. Shedding light on their experiences of living as liminal members of temporary communities in the transnational borderland between Myanmar and Thailand can illuminate processes of meaning-making by children on the move and the production of childhood in a globalized world. Circulating children originating in Myanmar and living in villages and camps along the border with Thailand are actively engaged in making new meanings of childhood and transgressing geopolitical and ethnocultural-specific boundaries. Their ability to survive and thrive in harsh and hyper-transitory circumstances could potentially confound a number of foundational theories of psychological development, and the lessons learned from these children's experiences and developmental trajectories could cast timely light on emerging forms of childhood in a world in which the lines demarcating states, identities and cultures will continue to become more liminal.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that in addition to children in refugee camps and children living as migrants in Thailand and elsewhere, there is an unknown number of children who are displaced and may be *de facto* stateless within Myanmar itself, largely as a result of armed conflict and the destruction or relocation of villages by the military junta. As opportunities for redress and reintegration may become more available to internally displaced children as part of the process of nation-building in Myanmar, their experiences, goals and needs warrant special attention extending beyond the scope of this discussion.
2. Myanmar became a member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997.

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Sarah Moselle is an independent scholar specializing in social policy research on topics of quality of life for families, social cohesion, service delivery systems and women's empowerment. She had published and presented on these topics in Canada and Indonesia. She holds an M.A. in religion and culture from Wilfrid Laurier University. Currently based in Central Asia, she is pursuing research and communication for international development agencies.