Not "Divided Places", But "A Living Space":
Chinese Women on the Thai-Malaysian Border*

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While borders are used to mark difference, the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, —the dialogue between ‘us’ and ‘them’—becomes ambiguous in the context of the Thai-Malaysian borderland. The “Thai-Malaysian border” as we have on the map today was delineated only after the 1909 Anglo-Siamese treaty. Nearly a century from its demarcation, today’s Thai-Malaysian borderland is occupied with state apparatus such as immigration, customs, border police forces with guns and flags everywhere. These are representations of state authority and the institutions producing the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. However, if we look closer at the experience of locals living in the borderland, the stories may be different.

This paper is about the spatial formation of the Thai-Malaysian borderland, the Narathiwat-Kelantan borderland in particular, which maintains close ties to the national boundary. It focuses on the local perspectives, especially those of the Chinese women who live as “less-visible citizens” in the “deep” Malay-Muslim world, but also as “in-between agents” by constructing various trans-border connections within the borderland. While much has been written about the diversity of southern Thailand and of Kelantan, little attention has been paid to the formation of the Thai-Malaysian borderland itself, particularly from the perspectives of local inhabitants who shape the space of the borderland in their daily practices of negotiation, manipulation, and cooperation with the state presence. From the local experience of Chinese women at the border, this paper will explore the dynamics of the Thai-Malaysian borderland as ‘a living space’ instead of ‘divided places’.

**Keywords:** living space, Thai-Malaysian Borderland, Chinese women, boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, dual citizenship

* My field research was conducted under the support of the research grant by the 21st Century Centre of Excellence (COE) program, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in 2002 and 2003. My appreciation goes on to Associate Prof. Yuko Mio, Associate Prof. Ryoko Nishii, Dr. Gordon Mathews, Liew Chin-Tong and Dr. Eric Kuhonta who read the draft carefully and provided careful corrections as well as constructive suggestions on this paper.
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1. 'Border' definition

The idea of 'border' we envisage today, especially in Southeast Asia, is based on birth of 'imagined community', or nation-state that declared a clear boundary between imagined 'us' and 'them'. Thongchai's work, in particular, shows how the western idea of 'border' along with mapping techniques was adopted in Siam.1) Such nature of 'border' as modern products is particularly manifested in the case of the 'Thai-Malaysian border'. The ‘Thai-Malaysian border’ as we have on the map today was delineated only after the 1909 Anglo-Siamese treaty. Nearly a century from its demarcation, today’s Thai-Malaysian borderland is occupied with state apparatus such as immigration, customs, border police forces with guns and flags everywhere. These are representations of state authority and institutions producing the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. However, if we look closer at the experience of locals living in the borderland, the stories may be different. By analyzing daily practices of the local inhabitants living by the border, this study is to explain how the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' is misleading. Indeed, the boundary between 'us' and 'them' is contested and negotiated by local inhabitants.

Here, I should clarify the meaning of 'border' or 'boundary' this paper denotes. The recent works on 'border' suggests two different approaches, namely, 'literalists' and 'a-literalists'. While the former approach is to regard 'border' as actual national boundary, the latter is to use 'border' in metaphorical meaning. Quoting Robert Alvarez, Pablo Vila explains the difference between 'literalists' and 'a-literalists' as below. The “literalists ... have focused on the actual problems of the border, including

migration, settlement, identity, labor and health. The "a-literalists," on the other hand, focus on social boundaries on the geographical border and also on all behavior in general that involves contradictions, conflict, and the shifting of identity."\(^2\) More important, I firmly agree with Vila, these two different approaches are not contradicting, rather intertwined one another, as they "have their origins in complex issues of culture and identity."\(^3\) I admit that the issues this paper deals with largely related to the literalistic notion of the boundary, namely the national boundary. This study, nevertheless, believes that the issues on the Thai-Malaysian borderland is impossible to be untouched both, the literalistic meaning of boundary and the metaphorical notion of boundary. Both notion of 'boundary' or 'border' are coexisted, intertwined, and often crisscrossed.

2. Research object and methodology

As the title shows, this study focuses on the Thai-Malaysian borderland,\(^4\) particularly that of the eastern coast, the Narathiwat-Kelantan borderland. As Nishii\(^5\) points out, the Muslims of the Southern Thailand can be divided into the two different types,
namely, Thai-speaking Muslims on the western coast and Malay-speaking Muslims on the eastern coast. My research field belongs to the latter, the space of Malay-speaking Muslims on the eastern coast. As many historians verify, it is impossible to write an account of Kelantan’s history without touching on that of Pattani. It is said that the present Malays in the northern Kelantan are the descendant of the people who had migrated from Pattani during 17th century to 18th century. Historical background manifests that the Muslim population in the Narathiwat-Kelantan borderland shares a similar cultural and linguistic background.

My focus is, however, not on the majority Malay-Muslims, but on the non-Muslims, particularly the local Chinese who maintain close ties across the border. While the Chinese in Kelantan have been the subject of various works, little is known its local ties across the border. As Malays, the Chinese community between the East Coast and the West Coast of the Thai-Malaysian borderland should be distinguished in respective historical contexts. As regards the West Coast, there is a J. Cushman’s excellent study on the Khew family who had constructed a business and political empire in the West Coast region from Penang to Ranong in the 19th to the early 20th centuries. The Cushman’s work implies the fundamental differences between the western coast, where huge foreign invests on tin mining brought a large number of migrants from China and India, and the eastern coast, where received small impacts of foreign invests except minor invests on rubber plantation and gold mining. Consequently, the trans-border ties among Chinese on the East Coast, seems to be less mobile, have gained little scholarly attention. The cultural feature of the Chinese in Kelantan, although attracted many social scientists, often debated within the Malaysian discourse. Unlike the Thais in Kelantan and the Muslims in Southern Thailand, the trans-border ties of the local Chinese in the Thai-Malaysian borderland have brought few political issues except the communist revolt in 1950s and 1960s. Thus, the trans-border, but local connections of the Chinese remain ‘less-visible’. This is why I believe it is important to examine the Chinese in the borderland.

6) The Muslim population in Kelantan make up 95% of the total population, the Muslims in Narathiwat make up 80% of the total population (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2001, Key Statistics of Thailand 2002).
11) As for the history of mining practices on the East Coast of Malay peninsula, see Dodge (1977).
12) Especially the Muslims in the bordering Southern Thai provinces have been the main political issues. The recent attacks on the schools and the army camp in Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala made the government to impose the martial laws on these provinces (“Thaksin wants close watch on pondok schools” New Straits Times. Jan 14, 2004).
13) According to Surin, the Communist Party of Malaya had built up an trans-border network between its headquarters in Betong, Perak, and the bordering district in Yala province in the Southern Thailand, by using the economic connections of rubber plantations, timber industry, tin mining operation (Surin 1982: 8).
The Chinese in Kelantan are generally divided into two distinct groups, namely Cina Bandar (town Chinese) and Cina Kampung (rural Chinese). The latter is often described as Peranakan Chinese. The term Peranakan is a Malay word, meaning ‘locally born’. It is well known in Indonesia that the term ‘Peranakan’ is used for the locally adapted Chinese, distinguishing from the newcomers as tolok. Such usage is similarly applied in the case of the Chinese inhabitants in Kelantan. As is well known, the features of Peranakan culture in Kelantan, particularly the clothing and eating habits as well as the linguistic usage, result from mixing of Hokkien, Malay, and Thai cultures. In the context of the border town today where I have been conducting research, however, such categorization (town vs. rural) may not be applicable anymore. First, owing to the high percentage of Chinese attending Chinese primary schools as well as the popularization of Chinese global media, there is a substantial increase of Mandarin-speaking population among the Chinese youth in Kelantan, regardless of their Cina Bandar or Peranakan background. Second, the pattern of the intermarriage between Chinese and Thais is changing. More than half of the recent Chinese marriages in the border town occur between Chinese males and Thai females. The significant change is that many of those wives originate from northern Thailand. According to the local people, until the 1970s in the border town of Kelantan, marriage of the local Malaysian Chinese male with the local Sino Thai or local Thai female was the major trend of intermarriage. By contrast, the contemporary marriages become more influenced by the non-local feature. The increase of the marriages between the local Chinese male and the non-local Thai female may bring new cultural aspects in the border town. Thus, in the context of the borderland, the ‘Chinese’ is no longer to be explained by the dichotomy between Cina Bandar and Cina Kampung.

15) According to Tan, while the label Baba is derogatory in certain contexts, the label Peranakan is not derogatory. Tan explains, the term, Peranakan is “perhaps the best objective label, for the cultural type we are discussing is similar to the Peranakan Chinese in Indonesia and Melaka... All the Peranakan Chinese have one similarity in that they are acculturated by the local people and all speak either the Malay dialect of the region they are in or a Malay dialect of their own.” (Tan 1982: 31).
16) It is often explained by the long tradition of intermarriage with Thais as well as the predominant Malay environment. Some pointed out its migrant history from Pattani in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is often argued the linguistic similarity between Hokkien spoken in Kelantan and that in Pattani. On the other hand, Cina Bandar is often pointed out its ‘purer’ Chineseness due to its less contact with predominant Malays in kampong (Teo 2003, Tan 1982).
17) There is a report that at least 88% of Chinese children today go to Chinese primary schools in Malaysia (“Nation Still Divided.” Far Eastern Economic Review. Dec 7, 2000).
18) The phenomenon of increasing Thai wives from northern Thailand can be traced to the social and economic conditions of the border town of Narathiwat where hundreds of bars and massage parlors are available. It is estimated that there are more than 20,000 sex-workers working at these bars, and most of them are from northern Thailand (according to a local Thai journalist). The number of children of Malaysian men and non-local Thai women is rising in the context of the borderland.
As I stated earlier, the aim of this study is to look at the local non-Muslims, the Chinese in particular, to elucidate how the modern nature of boundary between “us” and “them” on the Thai-Malaysian border is negotiated and contested by the local inhabitants. More importantly, its final goal is to rethink the borderland as ‘a living space’ instead of ‘divided places’.\(^{19}\) My field research in the border town of Kelantan, or Town A, was conducted from January 2003 until February 2004. During the period, I was primarily engaged in participant observation, interviews and archive work at the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur. During the fieldwork in Town A, I stayed with a Chinese female\(^{20}\) who run a Chinese restaurant in the heart of the town. While participant observation was done at the Chinese School in the morning, interviews with the local people were conducted in the afternoon. Primary language used in my fieldwork was Mandarin. Besides, Malay was used for the conversation not only with Thais and Malays, but also with the Chinese seniors who only speak Hokkien. To investigate the borderland from the local perspective, this paper chose three different Chinese women who are living in the borderland. The first story is about a maternal family, who practiced a family business through trans-border activities. The second story is about a girl born in Thailand, who received Chinese education as Malaysian Malay. The third story is about a single mother living in Thailand, who carefully uses her dual citizenship status in her daily practice.

3. Setting: Town A

a) Making boundary

A border town of Kelantan, or Town A\(^{21}\) is situated on the eastern coast of Malay Peninsula, about 40 km away from Kota Bharu, the capital of Kelantan. Golok river, flowing to the South China Sea, is dividing soil between Malaysia and Thailand. When the 1909 Anglo-Siamee treaty declared the birth of the boundary between ‘Siam’ and ‘British Malaya’,\(^{22}\) the landscape of the borderland looked far from today’s

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\(^{19}\) Borrowing the definitions by Donnan and Wilson, ‘space’ is “the general idea people have of where things should be in physical and cultural relation to each other, ‘place’, on the other hand, is “the distinct space where people live; it encompasses both the idea and the actuality of where things are (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 9). In other words, while ‘space’ is more attached to one’s sense of belonging, ‘place’ is more attached to the political and economic conditions.

\(^{20}\) I came to know her through the introduction by the principal of the Chinese school in Town A. Since she offered rooms to the female teachers of the school, the principal knew her well. She was born to the Hakka family in Kota Bharu. She once married to Hakka businessman in Kelantan, but the marriage didn’t last for long. After divorce, she came to Town A where her uncle (her mother’s younger brother) has run border business since 1960s. Using her uncle’s local connection, she started her furniture business for a while. Now she runs a small restaurant by her own, targeting local Chinese as well as Malaysian Chinese tourists.

\(^{21}\) According to the Census population 2000, the population of Town A was 4,505, there were 195 Chinese, 8 others, and only 1 Indians. Non-Malaysian citizens were 258. Most of non-Malaysian categories were Thai nationals (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2001).

\(^{22}\) The Siamese Government transferred to Britain “all rights to suzerainty, protection, administration and control whatsoever which they possessed over the States of Kelantan, Trengganu,
trading towns, as "there merely had a few small Malay *kampung* or villages along the Golok River".  

The development of the borderland was largely due to the connection between the East Coast Railway and the Siamese Railway in 1931. The advent of the new form of transportation, together with the unprecedented amount of commodity flowed throughout the Peninsula, promised potential commercial opportunities on the borderland. Especially, the trade of rice and rubber became crucial for the economic development of the borderland. Under such situation, the border town of the Narathiwat side, gradually had became a regional distribution center for commodities such as 'rice' from Northern Thailand and rubber from Kelantan and Southern Thailand.

According to the British Advisor reports, the greatest concern of the Kelantan administration at beginning was the inflow of commodities and diseases rather than human migration. This explains why the construction of Customs checkpoint as well as the signing of Customs agreement between Kelantan and Siam coincided with the opening of the railway across the border in 1920. Through the Annual Report of Kelantan in the late 1940s, we can glimpse how the people were aware of the specific value differences across the border river and how they consumed it.

*The Commodities smuggled into Kelantan are firstly rice and secondly, to a much smaller extent, Siamese tobacco. These are exchanged for rubber, copra, foodstuffs, such as tinned milk, flour, biscuits and on one or two occasions motor vehicles....*  

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24) With regard to the East Coast Railway, the Annual Report of Kelantan described as, "The Federated Malay States Railway system provides railway connection not only with the Western side of the Peninsula (through Siamese Territory) touching the coast at Tumpat, but also with Singapore running through the States of Pahang, Negeri Sembilan and Johor. The Construction of the line known as the East Coast Railway, which was begun in 1904, was completed during the year (1931). It was opened to traffic on the 6th September 1931, a formal inauguration ceremony being held on the previous day at a spot near Kuala Gris (Haynes 1932: 25).
25) Kakizaki examined how the development of railway system throughout Malay Peninsula promoted the rapid circulation of the commodities (Kakizaki 2000).
26) With the development of rubber production in Kelantan, Kelantan fall into the rice importer from the rice exporter. The import of rice in Kelantan peaked in 1928. The increase of rice import in Kelantan can be explained by two major factors, that is, the economic shift to rubber cultivation and the influx of immigrant workers (Haynes 1932: 13).
28) There were some concerns of disease from Siam. According to the administration record of British Advisor of Kelantan, such concerns expressed as "Possible importation of infectious diseases via the Siamese Railways. Asks if medical examination of passenger could be arranged and list of passengers supplies." (Arkib Negara File No. K1372.1399/21).
29) According to the record of the British Advisor of Kelantan, while Customs checkpoint was erected in 1921 as "Provision of facilities for handling goods at Rantau Panjang" (Arkib Negara File No. K37.37/21), "Customs Agreement" between Malay States and Siamese Government was signed in 1922 (Arkib Negara File No. K 816/47).
Such early records precisely indicate the contradicting two phenomena. While the development of the railway transport promoted the flow of commodities in the borderland, the state had struggled to control the enormous flow across the border. Nonetheless, the advent of the railway marked the initial development of the Siamese-Kelantan borderland by attracting the people who looked for the economic niches created at the border.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{b) Control on human flow}

The main transportations for crossing the national border today are sampan boat, motorbike, and car. Since the completion of the border bridge in 1973, crossing the border by sampan is regarded as illegal because it does not go through the immigration complex. Along the riverbank of the Malaysian side, there is a red signboard in three languages, Malay, English, and Thai, stating that,

\textit{Warning: Any person crossing the border through illegal entry is committing an offence under section 5 (2) immigration act 1959/63 (amendment 1997) which carried a penalty fined a maximum of RM 10,000,000 or five years imprisonment or both.}

In addition to the written warning, there are border polices with rifles stationing at the several points along the Malaysian side of riverbank. Under such circumstances, however, sampan boat remains one of the major forms of transportation for the local inhabitants, especially for Malays. A strange thing is that these border polices seem not to restrict these obvious ‘illegal’ border-crossings. According to a Malay female who lives in Thailand and works at the shop in Town A, she has never been asked by border police upon using sampan. A Chinese female who runs a sundry shop just behind the riverbank in Town A, once told me that “I always go there (the border town of Thailand side) by sampan. I am rather afraid of go through the bridge because my border pass was expired.” However, the local Chinese in general prefer to go through the bridge. Many Chinese express the fear of being captured by border police due to their ‘non-local looking’. Thus, while crossing the border by sampan seems to become daily practices, there always exists a reality to face the state power such as border police. By contrast, crossing the border bridge is apparently ‘legal’ because it has to go through immigration and customs. However, in reality, most of the local border-crossings are merely employing the method of \textit{Angkat Tangan} (hand raise). Although people in the borderland are entitled to be issued the border pass,\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Azman 2001: 72.
\textsuperscript{31} Today’s borderland, the passenger service across the border has been suspended since 1978 except for the occasional cargo trains. The passenger service was stopped due to the increasing rice smugglings from Thailand and border security reasons. The train service is only available either from Sungai Golok to the north or from Pasir Mas to the south (ibid.: 71).
\textsuperscript{32} ‘Border Pass’ is issued to the Thai nationals who resided for more than three years within a zone of 25 kilometers from the Malaysian border, and the Malaysia nationals who resided for more
the majority of them present their hands, instead of presenting the pass at the immigration checkpoint. According to a Chinese female who goes to the morning market in the Thailand side everyday, “Since I ‘know’ them (the officials), they just let me go. That’s very simple.” Such perception is common among the local inhabitants regardless one’s ethnic background.

c) Control on goods flow

As the economic structure of the border town shows, the formation of Town A closely relates to the development of the neighbouring town of Narathiwat. To put it more precisely, the economy of Town A itself highly depends on the economic ties with the Thailand side rather than its domestic connection. The economy of Town A can be divided into two main activities, between retail or wholesale business at *Jalan Besar* (main street) and market stalls at *Pasar Besar* (central market). As for *Jalan Besar*, there amounted 100 shops along the street. These shops are selling various products, including foods, sundries, fabric, diapers, electrical appliances, and mobile phones. Among them, Chinese owners consist half. Major business practice on *Jalan Besar*, particularly along the riverbank, is ‘sampan trade’. Whereas the author conveniently applies the term ‘sampan trade’, local Chinese call it *xia huo* in Mandarin, illustrating loading goods down to sampan boat. These shops do their retail business at front facing the main street one hand, they do their wholesale business at back facing the river on the other. Each shop has storerooms and the goods are conveyed by the long, wooden-made slopes laying from the back gate down to the river. These sampan traders are selling halal foods, imported onions, and diapers. One should note that the flows of the goods by sampan trade are always one-way, namely, from Town A (Malaysia) toward Narathiwat (Thailand). Few goods flows from Thailand by sampan to the shops in Town A could be witnessed. As mentioned earlier, there are border polices stationed along the riverbank, who obviously are aware of such activities. However, neither border polices nor Customs officers try to control such flows. According to a Malaysian Customs official, their main concern is the flow from Thailand, not from Malaysia. Since there is no border police stationing on the Thailand side, such unilateral, informal flow is to be realized. For Malaysian Customs, smugglings of rice, drug and arms from Thailand are the major problems on the border. These flows are often controlled not on the border river, but on the border police checkpoints few kilometers away from the borderline.

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33) The early Chinese settlers to the border town of Narathiwat were the construction workers of Siamese railway in 1910s. Many were the Hokkien and the Hakka Chinese. However, after the World War II, the Teochiew Chinese came down to the south from Bangkok. Due to the strong demands on rubber during the Korean War, the major source of income in the region was the rubber industry in the 1950s (Teo Chiew Association of Sungai Golok 2001).
On the other hand, more than a hundred small stalls occupy Pasar Besar, mostly run by Malay women from neighbouring Narathiwat. These women sell various Thai products ranging from fruits to cheap T-shirts. Thai rice is one of the items sold at Pasar. They are clearly targeting Malaysian domestic tourists from Kuala Lumpur, Penang or Johor Bharu. It is worth noting that the two business practices at jalan Besar and Pasar Besar are fundamentally different in nature. The former is done by the residents of Town A, majority are Chinese, selling “Malaysian products” to the customers in Thailand. On the other hand, the latter is done by the residents of the Thailand side, majority are Malays, selling “Thai products” to the Malaysian tourists. Both activities, however, are involving informal flows and depending on close ties across the border.

d) History of a Chinese school on border

The Chinese school, which we shall call ‘School K,’ is situated in the heart of Town A. The school is categorized as a national-type primary school, or Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebansaang Cina aimed at providing both national and Chinese education for Malaysian citizens. Its founding moment, however, clearly demonstrate its close ties across the border. When the school was established in 1955, nearly half of the total 48 students were from Thailand. Many local Chinese still remember that the Hokkien association in Narathiwat played a central role to provide financial support. Since Chinese education was almost banned under Phibun’s second regime in Thailand, it was natural for the Chinese in Narathiwat to find alternative way at the Chinese school of the neighboring town of Kelantan.

The situation began to change after the implementation of 1961 Education Act. For the first five years, School K’s finance situation was said to be relatively smooth. However, under the 1961 Education Act, School K finally had to choose her own destiny, either being incorporated as a national-type school or remaining private. Having faced with financial problems then, the only option to be left for School K was to be incorporated into the national system for access to the government subsidies. Simultaneously, it meant the refusal of the students who did not possess Malaysian citizenship. Nevertheless, this did not mean the complete termination of the students cross the border everyday. This will be examined later from the experience of a former student.

34) The total students were 155, with 105 Malays, 49 Chinese and 7 Thais. Apart from this, there were about 100 children aged 4 to 5 at the kindergarten attached to School K (based on the interview with the principal of School K, on Jan 18, 2003).
35) The national-type Chinese primary schools use Mandarin as the medium of instruction. Since it is an integral part of the national system, it receives state funds and provides free education (Tan 2000: 228).
37) It is generally understood that the Chinese primary schools in Malaysia were absorbed into the national system by the 1957 Education Act first, the Chinese secondary schools were absorbed into the national system by the 1961 Education Act second (Tan 1989: 61). In this regard, the case of School K is considered to be exceptional.
4. Chinese women on border

a) Practice one: maternal family

Suiyu\textsuperscript{38} came to the border town of Kelantan along with her mother and her grandmother in late 1940s when she was merely one year old. Her grandmother had migrated from Fujien province in China and her mother was born in the village 30 km away from Town A. Since her mother had divorced before they came to the border town, Suiyu was brought up without knowing father. As Suiyu says “My mother never had mentioned about my father. She raised me and my sister by herself.” Her mother had run a sundries shop along the river. Considering that the majority of the Chinese settlers came to the border town in 1950s and 1960s,\textsuperscript{39} Suiyu’s family can be considered as an earlier settler to the border town.

Suiyu went to the newly opened School K when she was eight years old. She remembers that her classmates came from the Narathiwat side by crossing the border river. “Almost half of my classmates were from there (Narathiwat). But in those days, it was just a matter of crossing a narrow river by sampan (boat). I never thought of it as a border ... I used to go for movies with my sister to the town across the Golok river. My house was on the river bank. From behind my house, we could call sampans at anytime. It took only a minute to the bank over there.” For little Suiyu, the place across the border was merely ‘a place across a narrow river’ just behind her house.

After her secondary education in Kota Bharu, she was asked to return to home to help her mother’s business. It was in the middle of the 1960s. Beside the sundries shop business, her mother crossed the border to take orders from the Narathiwat side. “With the orders from the border town of Thailand, my mother went to Kota Bharu to buy the requested commodities.\textsuperscript{40} She had always been back and forth. She had never been at home during the daytime. ... She spoke any languages such as Malay, Thai and Chinese dialects. ... My mother was a brave woman indeed.” Thus, her multiple language knowledge as well ‘braveness’ as a border-crosser helped a single mother’s business in the border town.

After the death of her mother, Suiyu shifted her family business into the fabric shop mainly targeting Muslim Malays, particularly from Southern Thailand. Thus, the business style entirely transformed from that of her mother’s. One thing she inherited from her mother was the way of recruit hands through mother-daughter relationship.

\textsuperscript{38} For protection of their own privacy, the individual names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

\textsuperscript{39} According to the 1957 Census population, the Chinese population in Town A was 315 persons; this was much larger than the current Chinese population of 195 (Population Census 1957, Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 2001).

\textsuperscript{40} Throughout the 1950s to 1970s, the town was flourishing with the border trade with Thailand. As many shop owners admit, they sold anything, from foodstuffs to the electrical products, depending on demand from the Thailand side. Due to the restricted import from China, there was a strong consumer demand for Chinese products in Southern Thailand.
As a single mother with two little daughters, her mother came to the border town to find means to survive and to earn a living. Suiyu inherited her mother's business with her husband who married into the Suiyu's family. Suiyu's husband was born to the Hokkien family in the same village where Suiyu was born. He married to Suiyu through matchmaking by a mutual friend of the two families. While Suiyu is busy dealing with her clients and salesmen, her husband always sits down quietly at the corner of the shop by reading newspapers. Thus, Suiyu has occupied a central place in family business. Now the tradition is passing on to her eldest daughter, who married a Kelantan Chinese working in Kuala Lumpur. While the husband can be back in the border town only on the weekend, the eldest daughter remains in the border town with her two sons.41) Thus, the tradition of the maternal family is maintained until today.

b) Practice two: a Chinese girl with Malay name

The former teacher of School K, Lim Laoshi42) clearly remembers the students from Narathiwat. Among them, there was a Chinese girl studying under a Malay name. Yuxiang was born in the neighbouring town of Narathiwat, Thailand in early 1960s. By the time when she reached school age, nearby School K was already incorporated into government schools. As mentioned earlier, any chance to receive Chinese education in Thailand was hopeless.43) For the Chinese in Thailand who wished to have their children in Chinese educated, sending children to overseas was the only choice. Fortunately, Yuxiang was living in the border town of Naratiwat. School K was locating just across a narrow river.

When Yuxiang registered at the School K, her registered name was not ‘Yuxiang’ but was ‘Zabidah’, a name of a Malay girl. She was registered as a daughter of a Malay father in Kelantan. Yuxiang’s father came to know her ‘paper father’ through his border business with Town A. He was asked by Yuxiang’s father to register Yuxiang as his own daughter. However, one might ask, “how did her ‘paper father’ manage to get a birth certificate for a six-year-old girl?” That is simple. Since it had been normal to give a birth at home in 1960s, especially in kampung area, many did not register their children until the year of schooling. Nobody suspected anything about Yuxiang’s ‘paper father’. This is how Yuxiang gained a Malaysian birth certificate.

Recalling her primary school days, “In fact, I did not want to study Chinese at all. Even I hated that at the beginning. But my father wanted me to have Chinese edu-

41) According to her husband, he once asked his wife to leave for Kuala Lumpur. But this was rejected due to her strong commitment to her mother’s business. However, recently, Suiyu’s eldest son who is getting married with a Thai female from Chiang Rai, came back to the border town to help Suiyu’s business. This event may lead to a new situation of the family business in the future.

42) Meaning ‘teacher’ in Mandarin.

43) There was a Chinese school that once operated in the border town of Narathiwat, but was closed in the late 1930s.
cated. Since he was a *Chong Guo Ren* or Chinese man from China, he was very serious about Chinese education.” Thus, her Malaysian birth certificate was merely a tool to receive a primary Chinese education in the border town of Kelantan. The irony is that although her aim was to receive mother tongue education, she studied Chinese as a Malay student instead of as a Chinese.44) After the graduation, Yuxiang continued her study at the private secondary school in Singapore with her real Thailand identification instead of using her ‘Malaysian Malay’ identification. Today, Yuxiang inherited her father’s trading business in the border town of Narathiwat. Thanks to her education in Malaysia, her multi-linguistic knowledge on Thai, Mandarin, and Malay is benefiting on her trading business. By contrast, her three children are educated in Thai, with little knowledge about Chinese.45)

e) **Practice three: a single mother with dual citizenship**

Simei is in her early 30s and living in the town of Narathiwat with her two daughters studying at School K. Recently, she opened her own cake shop on the main street of the town. Simei was born in Padang Besar, another border town of Peris, as a daughter to a Sino-Thai father and Malaysian Chinese mother. As Simei remembers, her home at Padang Besar had always been in a Thai-speaking environment due to the Thai workers at her father’s sundries shop as well as the Thai-speaking relatives at home. It was natural for her to pick up Thai when she was little. After completing her primary education in Padang Besar, she left home for her secondary education in Penang. Soon after her graduation from the secondary school, she married a Chinese Malaysian working in Penang. However, her marriage didn’t last for long. After the birth of her second daughter, she divorced and moved into the border town of Narathiwat where her aunt runs a bakery.

As Simei confesses, “For me, both Thailand and Malaysia are the places where I belong.” Such dual attachment can be manifested not only by her family and educational background but also by her legal status, possessing both Malaysian and Thai citizenship. Since she was born in Malaysia, she is a natural Malaysia citizen.46) Meanwhile, because she was registered as a daughter of her father’s relative in Thailand, she gained Thai citizenship at the same time. Despite her status as being a ‘privileged’ dual citizen, she carefully uses her two identifications accordingly. Simei emphasizes that her Thai identity card is used only for her business such as purchasing properties

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44) There was a similar case of a Chinese from neighbouring Narathiwat. He was registered as a child of his father’s friend in Kelantan. But in this case, he was registered as Chinese student because his “paper father” was Chinese. Now he became a successful businessman in Thailand.

45) Like many other places in Thailand, it is very normal for the third or the forth generation of Chinese, or *Lukchín* (Child of Chinese’ in Thai) to be educated only in Thai (Bao 1994).

46) Citizenship law of Malaysia is based on ‘jus soli’. That is, people who born in soil of Malaysia is entitled to Malaysian citizenship. In addition to this condition, father or mother should be a Malaysian citizen or Permanent Resident (General Laws of Malaysia Vo. 1: 21).
in Thailand. When she crosses the border, she uses her Malaysian passport by renewing her visa once a month.\footnote{Other than renewing of the visa once a month, she becomes one of those ‘Angkat Tangan’ (hand raise) border crossers.}

Her daughters are future dual citizens too. Since they are born in Penang, they have Malaysian birth certificates, but they are also registered as daughters of Simei’s relatives in Thailand. As Simei says “I am sure that their Thai Identity Card will help them (her daughters) in future. With two identity cards, they can live either in Malaysia or Thailand according to their will. Since my father gave me two identity cards, I also give them two.” Like their mother, the sisters are living in both a Mandarin and Thai-speaking environment at home. But once they cross the border, they are switching into either Mandarin or Malay speaking environment at school. As Simei admits, having received five years secondary education in Chinese school in Penang brought her enthusiasm toward Chinese education. She is even considering her daughters’ future education in Penang or Singapore.

**Conclusion**

a) **Negotiating with the national boundary**

As above, three experiences of the Chinese women on the Thai-Malaysian border were examined based on their personal narrations. Although these three women were all related to the same Chinese school in Town A, their backgrounds and experiences were entirely different. Nevertheless, it is clear that the national boundary between Malaysia and Thailand is the main boundary they faced with. Moreover, the experience of School K itself had to go through creating such boundary. The three Chinese women’s stories, thus, precisely reflect different periods in the process of nationalization at School K.

With regard to the Suiyu’s case, her experience in 1950s mirrors the pre-nationalization era at School K. Not only the evident that half of her classmates were border-crossers from Thailand, but also her feeling toward border as ‘merely a narrow river’ clearly demonstrate the location of School K within a living space beyond the national boundary. By contrast, Yuxiang’s experience clearly reflects the transitional period in the process of nationalization at School K. The time when she attended School K was in early 1970s, a decade after the nationalization of School K. Her father’s practice, using his Malaysian connection to acquire a fake identification for his daughter, was not alone. Such practices were seen generally, but probably until the 1970s. According to a former teacher at School K, there were numbers of the students from Thailand, who probably practiced the same method as Yuxiang. Lastly, Simei’s experience particularly implies the contemporary situation in borderland. Her legal status as a dual citizenship represents a useful tool for the local inhabitants living in the border-
land. It can be explained by her personal experiences not only her education in Malaysia, but also her business in Thailand. Both Yuxiang and Simei’s cases demonstrate that the legal status plays as a tool to facilitate their border crossing. Each practice reflects the different conditions in the borderland with the times. Here, one should note that such practices of manipulating legal status are illegal in nature. Simei’s careful usage of her Thai identity card confirms her awareness of such risky nature.

The three women’s experiences interestingly reflect different stages in the process of nationalization of School K. On the surface, School K seems to have shifted its practice from inclusion to exclusion by incorporating into the national education system. In reality, however, both nationalization and denationalization are coexisted and contested in the borderland.

b) Borderland as a living space

Thus, the stories of three different Chinese women precisely illustrated that the national boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is to be negotiated by the local people in the borderland. The idea of ‘living space’ came from such condition in which local people conveniently cross the border in their daily lives.

Here, we should make clear the mechanism of ‘living space’ from the local practices in Town A. The state’s control on human and goods flow, is one of the key factors to facilitate ‘living space’. That is, the selective control on the flows, according to its nature of flows, namely, local or non-local. As I mentioned earlier, actual state’s control on the flows can be witnessed at the checkpoints kilometers away from the border. In other words, actual practices of control on informal flows of human and commodity are not always conducted on the national boundary. It explains why Town A is able to sustain the way of economy depending on the informal flows, whilst smuggles of rice, drug, and arms can be controlled at the border police checkpoint. While the state delineated a clear boundary on the map, the actual practice by the state authority is creating a space of vacuum that allows various informal flows within the borderland. That vacuum is to facilitate the borderland as a “living space”.

Apart from the mechanism of ‘living space’ beyond the national boundary, the certain conditions of local inhabitants in ‘living space’ should be identified here. It can be summarized in three conditions, namely, trans-border connection (kinship, friend, business), multi-linguistic knowledge, and dual citizenship. Again using the three women’s experiences, it is to explain these conditions. With regard to the Suiyu’s case, although her mother started her business by her alone, her multi-linguistic knowledge helped her to construct business connection across the border. As for the Yuxiang’s case, her father used his business connection in Town A to acquire a fake birth certificate for his daughter to have Chinese education. As for the Simei’s case, her family background was already in dual national conditions, namely in-between Thailand and Malaysia. Being a single mother, she had to be a breadwinner to raise her children. Under such difficulties, her kinship connection as well as her dual citi-
zenship status made possible her business in the border town of Narathiwat. In addition to these conditions, their ethnic identity as Chinese demonstrated in their educational practices beyond the national boundary. Most important thing is that despite their identification toward Chinese education, Chinese identity is not necessary locating against that of Malay. The Yuxiang’s case, in particular, manifests such positioning between Chinese and Malay. When Yuxiang’s father asked his Malay counterpart, he obviously knew that her daughter would be registered under the Malay name. As long as Yuxiang’s word, she didn’t blame for what her father did. According to her former classmates in Town A, they still remember her nickname according her Malay registered name. Thus, within ‘living space’ beyond the border, the difference between Chinese and Malay seemed to be not contradicting, rather parallel. Even today, such condition can be identified.

c) Toward metaphorical notion of border
As I stated earlier, this study believes that both literalistic notion and metaphorical notion of border are closely intertwined on the Thai-Malaysian borderland. Since this paper mainly dealt with the experience of Chinese women at School K, the outcome is much related to the national boundary. In relation to the metaphorical notion of border, two contemporary issues at School K will be introduced briefly. Firstly, there is an increase of the Malay students. Secondly, there is another increase of the Chinese children living with non-local Thai mother in the border town of Narathiwat.\(^{48}\) Particularly, the increasing of Malay students is significant. While overall Chinese population is dropping in Town A, Malay enrolment is increasing.\(^{49}\) In Malaysia, Malay students who study at Chinese school are nothing new. There is estimation that about 10% of the student population at Chinese schools in Malaysia is non-Chinese.\(^{50}\) What is the particular thing at School K is that some of the Malay students at School K are from Thailand. Such phenomenon reflects the School K’s location within a living space beyond the border. This exactly implies the parallel positioning among the different ethnicities within the living space that I mentioned earlier. To a degree, there is a condition to let people to choose various schools within a living space according to one’s will. Due to the paper limitation, these two factors could not be examined in this paper. However, these contemporary phenomena enable us to explain that both

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48) These families, I would say, are the products of the socio economic factor of the border town of Narathiwat. For Malaysian male, southern Thailand is the popular destination to enjoy ‘beer and woman’. Many young women, mostly from Northern Thailand, came to Sungai Golok to work at the bars or massage parlors. These children are the result of the mix marriage, often defact, between Chinese Malaysian male from other states and Thai Thai-citizen female from Northern. Most of the cases are that while fathers are working in the big cities like Kuala Lumpur or Penang, probably they have families there, mothers raise children at the border town of Narathiwat. Since the living cost in Narathiwat is cheaper than Kelantan, the mothers and the children tend to stay in Narathiwat, but sending their children to Town A.

49) See Table 4.

the literal notion of border and the metaphorical notion of the border are coexisted, intertwined, and often crisscrossed. I will leave these matters as my future theme to develop the concept of ‘living space’.

Thus, this study looked at the local livings at the border by examining the border as a “living space”. While much of the debates about the border are focusing on the identity formation of the people who cross the ‘painful’ boundaries, little studies focus on the local people who live in the borderland. In other words, the people without mobility, but cross the border within the borderland everyday have not attracted the scholars who work on the border. Therefore, I hope this study will provide new perspectives on the borderland, particularly for the scholarship on Southeast Asia.

References

The Legal Advisor, Kelantan. 1931. Legislation in Kelantan in 1930.

Statistics

Appendix

Table 1. Population of Town A by ethnic group in 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Malays</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indians</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Non-Malaysian citizens</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town A</td>
<td>4040</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>4502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia (2001)

Table 2. Transition of Chinese population in Mukim A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1957</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mukim A*</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mukim (district) A is including bandar (town) A and surrounding rural area

Table 3. Chinese population by age group in Town A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>0–19</th>
<th>20–34</th>
<th>34–49</th>
<th>50–64</th>
<th>65–</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in Town A</td>
<td>46 (25%)</td>
<td>30 (16%)</td>
<td>46 (24%)</td>
<td>40 (21%)</td>
<td>28 (14%)</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: based on the author’s field work in 2003

Table 4. Student population of School K by ethnic group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Malays</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td></td>
<td>140</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td></td>
<td>128</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td></td>
<td>105</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: based on the data offered by School K