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► **To cite this version:**

François Robinne. Urban Enclaves. Tony Waters, Ashley South, Chayan Vaddhanaphuti. Moving around Myanmar : migration in, from, and back to Burma, Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), pp.31-60, 2021, 978-616-398-635-1. ⟨halshs-03466154⟩

**HAL Id: halshs-03466154**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03466154v1>**

Submitted on 4 Dec 2021

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## Urban Enclaves: New Forms of Precarity for Exiled Workers in Bangkok

François Robinne

### Abstract

Corrugated iron barracks, hosting migrant workers and others in precarious conditions, are common in Bangkok. The forms of social organization in these urban enclaves seem entangled with many of the major issues related to contemporary migratory flows. None of these issues, however, is sufficient to define the intrinsic specificity of the enclaves, especially when compared to other forms of urban habitat where migrant workers reside.

It is elsewhere, towards other conceptual horizons, that we must turn to understand the *modus operandi* of the Bangkok enclaves, where a majority of inhabitants are migrant workers. We must turn to a multi-sited approach of social crossroads, from rural to urban, between autochthony and transnationalism. Especially since there is a shared cosmopolitan condition drawing a line of continuity between the villages of the highlands of Burma and these enclaves of the Thai megalopolis. This chapter highlights the very recent emergence and multiplication of enclaves in various districts at the center of Bangkok and outlines their geomorphology. The relationships of enclave-residing migrant workers with the associative environment is analyzed

to allow us to better understand these urban enclaves and their paradoxical status as territories of desocialization.

**Keywords:** Bangkok enclaves, transnational migrant workers, cosmopolitan condition, consistency of social crossroads, associative mediation, multiple mobilities, remittance, indebtedness, social distancing policy, territories of desocialization.



**Figure 2.1:** Map of Bangkok annotated with areas referred to in the chapter, created by Jean-Luc Didelot

# 1. Introduction

What forms of sociability persist in territories of desocialization? It is an understatement to say that the migrant worker enclaves at the heart of Bangkok gave me a hard time: both on a physical level, due to the difficulty of getting past the watchmen restricting access to the corrugated iron enclosures; and on a conceptual level, by dint of failing to decipher the *modus operandi* of the tens or even thousands of people who find residence there, all nationalities combined, but mostly from Burma, Laos and Cambodia. All the while wondering, what could possibly be the contribution of these urban enclaves in relation to what is already known and rehashed about migration? Especially since in appearance nothing seems to distinguish the enclaves from other more or less precarious forms of habitat studied thus far in the literature on migrant workers. Remittance strategies during family breakdown, gender perspectives in exile, transversal identities of refugees for the most part without papers, anxiety-provoking dimensions of multiple mobilities: these alignments of worker barracks in Bangkok and the forms of social organization that reign there do not at first glance escape any of the major issues related to contemporary migratory flows.<sup>1</sup> None of these issues, however, is sufficient to define the intrinsic specificity of enclaves. Although quite common in appearance, they have to my knowledge no equivalent.

It is to elsewhere, towards other conceptual horizons, that we must turn in order to understand the enclaves. This is the openness to which the social crossroads taken as the object of study lead; an approach that contributes to strengthening the multi-sited perspective (Falzon, 2009) of rural and urban areas, between autochthony and transnational, especially since I found a similar cosmopolitan condition in the villages of highland Burma and in the enclaves of the Thai megalopolis.<sup>2</sup> These enclaves only very recently emerged, appearing after the economic crisis of the 1990s, at the turn of the 2000s, with a strong

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1. For example, those issues explored by Baujard (2009), Constable (2014), Cung Liang Hu Chin (2018), Fogel (2019), Hoang et & Yeoh (2015), Lindquist (2009), Piper (2008), Pollock & Soe Lin Aung (2010) and Roulleau-Berger (2010).
  2. For a more detailed discussion on the problematic of the universality of the cosmopolitan condition, i.e., the cosmopolitan condition as the human condition, refer to Robinne (2021).

intensification in the wake of the *ASEAN Economic Development 2015*. This free trade policy between ten ASEAN member countries was accompanied by the establishment of highway, rail, maritime and air development corridors, the construction of deep-water ports and gas and oil pipelines. Although this policy of economic integration primarily concerns the movement of goods, it was accompanied by exponential intra-Asian migratory flows (Eng et al., 2013). In ten years, from 1995 to 2005, Thailand quadrupled its number of immigrants, making it the number one host country in Southeast Asia with 55 per cent of total migrants, ahead of Malaysia and Singapore (Testaverde et al., 2017, p. 2, 40).

Bangkok has become a megalopolis with a proliferation of construction sites, all pointing to the recurring question: When will the real estate bubble burst? In just a few years, the enclaves on Ratchadaphisek (ถนนรัชดาภิเษก) and on Asok Station (สถานีอโศก) (sites 4 and 3, figure 2.1) grew exponentially, consolidating a tangle of enclaves in which hundreds of migrant workers congregate. The surveys undertaken for this chapter were carried out between 2014 and 2019 and focused mainly on Burmese workers, in the broad sense of the term, all linguistic, cultural and religious affiliations combined. The cosmopolitan condition prevails in these enclaves including among people of Burmese citizenship. There is a majority of Baw and S'gaw Karen (ကရင်) speakers, also Pa-O (ပအိုဝ်း), as well as Austronesian Mon (မွန်), Tibeto-Burman Chin (ချင်း) and Kachin (ကချင်), in addition to Bama (ဗမာ). In this diverse linguistic context, Burmese and Thai are essential vernacular languages.

What appears to be part of a generalized process of globalization cannot be separated in the case of Burma from a certain form of continuity between the post-independence era, the successive dictatorships and the “democratic transition”. That continuity is found in the process of ethnic reification in the wake of which the Rohingya drama is inscribed (Boshier, 2017; Robinne, 2019). Globalization combined with nationalism; everything is in place to precipitate transnational migratory flows. While the COVID-19 pandemic at first temporarily reversed the trend, the recent coup d'état has sparked new waves of cross-border refugees towards India and Thailand. Developing in the sprawling city of Bangkok is an interlacing of industrial zones,

workers' towns and corporatist districts that Pongsawat (2007) describes as "cities in the city" and precarious habitats of a new kind. Sieng-Kong Bangna (เซียงกงบางนา) in southeast Bangkok is just one example. This and the enclaves like it are unexpected consequences of geopolitics in motion. In what follows, I will show that their geographical position in the city center combined with the rules imposed by employer companies on residents constitute the main distinctive features of the enclaves.



**Figure 2.2:** *Enclave on Sukhumvit*

## 2. Geolocation and Morphology of the Enclaves

Four sites were selected for this chapter based on their configuration, respective dimensions, internal organization, variable hygiene conditions and accessibility. The central location of these enclaves has remained constant during the years, but one of them has since disappeared, that on Sukhumvit (site 2, figure 2.1), while another – in fact a very important complex grouping several enclaves – appeared in Ratchadaphisek (site 4, figure 2.1). Each of these sites consists of one to three adjoining enclaves with their own enclosures, each one belonging to different owners. Living conditions can vary greatly. The small, rather unsanitary structures on Rama IX (site 1, figure 2.1), the “historic” and dilapidated island at the foot of the Sukkhumvit (สุขุมวิท) towers (site 2, figure 2.1), the equally old enclave standing in the central district of Pratunam (ประตูน้ำ), the many two-level alignments drawn at the line of Asok Station and Ratchadaphisek (sites 3 and 4, figure 2.1): none of the living conditions of the chosen sites are directly comparable.<sup>3</sup>

In the precarious universe of corrugated iron that is the enclaves, predominantly male and relatively elderly people coexist. Estimated at around 30 per cent only, women are never independent residents in the enclaves; they are either wives - the most frequent case - or daughters of residents, and themselves holders of an employment contract. Contrasting with the newcomers, mostly teenagers between 14 and 20 years old, who usually frequent associations such as Yadanasein Education Development or the Dear Burma Academy (Robinne, 2021), the average age in the enclaves is much older. The average age is 30 years old: 30.8 years in the group of Rama IX (site 1 on the map), 26.7 years in the more recent settlement group of Ratchadaphisek (site 4 on the map), which is to say, the residents in the enclaves are both uneducated and adults in their prime. All of

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3. Only four sites were selected. Despite the importance of certain groups, such as Asok and Ratchadaphisek, the number of enclaves scattered around central Bangkok is much greater, in particular along Sukhumvit Avenue. On *soi* 24, but also *soi* 17, 50, 71, 77: the streets perpendicular to Sukhumvit are a maze where the smallest vacant plot is occupied by an enclave, some of which, over time, are completely integrated into the district. The lack of studies combined with the constant displacement of urban enclaves makes it very difficult to estimate the number of people concerned, probably several tens of thousands in the four areas studied.

them left school very early, well before the tenth and final year of schooling in Burma. Significantly, children's education is an absolute priority for parents in exile. In fact, the Burmese context and the difficulties relating to remittances rarely make it possible to ensure education. Several reasons can explain the relatively high average which prevails in the enclaves, including the trying nature of the work in the construction sector, family fragmentation due to internal regulations, and the fact that finding residence in an enclave turns out to be a stopgap in an already long transnational journey. Unless you are a single man, this is rarely a first transnational job, as the de facto hindrance to family reunification contributes to making enclaves a default choice. Given the average age of close to 30 years, residents in the enclaves already have long transnational experience.

Some enclaves are owned by small independent entrepreneurs; one of them, the most dilapidated and least maintained among a group of three on Rama IX Rd (site 1, figure 2.1), belongs to a dentist who initiated the real estate project with support from local authorities. This is exceptional however, as most enclaves depend on large groups of buildings and public works for the implementation of safety, organizational and hygiene rules, in addition to the more or less loose compliance with the general migration rules defined by the Thai and Burmese state administrations. Enclaves vary considerably in size, with the smallest, and often oldest, enclaves hosting between 50 and 2,000 workers. The largest, usually more recent, settlements have up to 10,000-20,000 residents according to my estimates.

The enclaves occupy private real estate plots<sup>4</sup> in the very heart of downtown Bangkok, temporarily vacant, awaiting the start of some other construction project. They consist of rows of barracks of one or two floors, made of corrugated iron sheet, and surrounded by an enclosure, sometimes very high, so high it can take the appearance of an impassable wall. But even this imposing external wall is made only of light corrugated iron sheets, temporary materials, with shelter at the single entrance for the security guards who strictly control access.

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4. "Plots" rather than urban "wastelands" because these private compounds are not abandoned lands despite their appearance; "plots" also rather than "interstices" because the enclaves are in no case the appropriation by locals of a vacant public space.

There are five constant markers across the enclaves: 1) The companies and businessmen legally responsible for the enclaves organize their administration based on the state's changing migration laws and norms – a sort of administrative labyrinth in permanent recomposition<sup>5</sup> – therefore, the management teams within the enclaves (watchmen, cleaning staff, shopkeepers, pickup drivers) are exclusively Thai citizens, the only people in the space with permanent employment; 2) The cosmopolitan condition reigns, as residents come mostly from countries bordering Thailand with their access to community reunification challenged by the predominant recruitment and work conditions; 3) The ubiquitous “one job/one room” regulation, according to which no unemployed person can stay in an enclave long-term, with consequent impediments for families, for example preventing unemployed de facto spouses from residing with their partner and preventing young children from residence once the weaning period is finished; 4) Retail shops trade inside the enclosure alongside evening outdoor markets, encouraging residents not to go out of the enclave to meet daily needs; and 5) Multiple mobilities affecting both infrastructures and people which adds to the anxiety inherent in exile contexts.

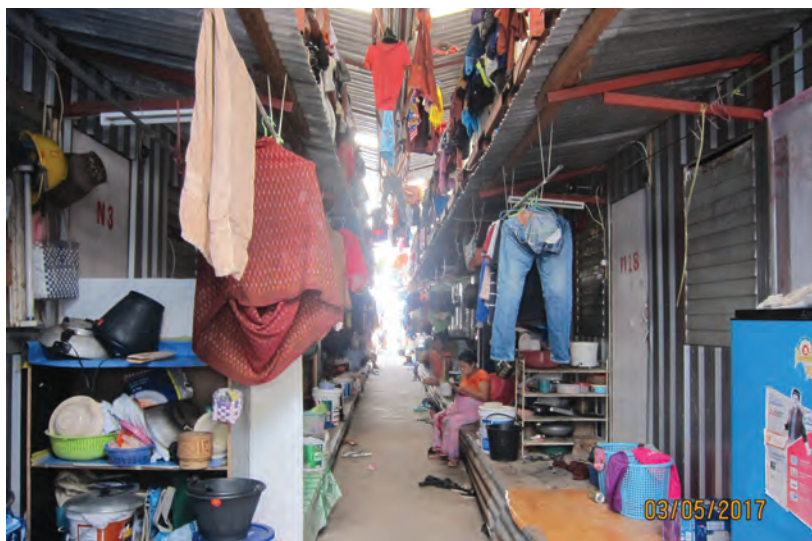
The location of the enclaves are not proximate or linked to that of the construction sites where most workers are employed. Proximity of construction sites and enclaves is even an exception. Some workers, such as those working in Ratchadaphisek District on the three twin towers or on the site of the metro terminal under construction in 2020, do have the opportunity to be able to walk from their respective enclaves to their place of work (site 4, figure 2.1). But this is far from always being the case. It takes an average of one hour by pick-up truck to get from an enclave to a worksite. The ephemeral nature of the plots destined to be built upon corresponds with the mobility of these people. As soon as a plot becomes constructible, the enclave erected on its site must be moved. In the same way, the conclusion of a construction project means for a particular category of workers - handlers, drillers of retaining piles, concrete screed installers, window

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5. In his analysis of Thailand's immigration system, Pongsawat (2007) explains how it permanently places migrants in a “registered illegal immigrant workers” category. For a detailed description of the struggle for administrative documents by migrant workers, see Robinne (2021).

installers, painters, teams cleaning etc. – relocation to another worksite and enclave or even the loss of their job.

The criteria that originally governed the choice of these urban enclaves have generally remained constant from one year to the next. I say “originally” because between 2014 and 2019, a period corresponding to data collection for this chapter, things changed considerably, with an exponential increase in the number of enclaves and migrant workers.<sup>6</sup> This does not call into question the specificity of the enclaves, but a few material variants indicate a change of scale: the increasing number both of migrant workers and larger enclaves are taking on an industrial dimension. Alignments of superimposed containers have appeared. Compared to the corrugated iron barracks, the space allocated to the workers is a little larger, above all higher, but this does not translate into more comfort, rather the reverse, because the rooms in the containers become dormitories with only a single entrance and exit. The new presence of these container accommodations testifies to the structured mobility affecting the enclaves and their residents.



**Figure 2.3:** *Enclave on Asok*

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6. The impacts of the pandemic combined with the 1 February, 2021 coup d'état unfortunately cannot be measured at the time of writing, in April 2021, due to current difficulties accessing the field sites.

### 3. Unfixed Vernacular Terminologies

Likely due to the recent emergence of this type of enclave, none of the vernacular terminologies are suitable for defining them. Oscillating between ideas of overcrowding, promiscuity, insalubrity, illegality – in the sense of encroachment on public space, which is not the case – and communitarianism, the discrete vernacular terms for the enclaves are not yet fixed.<sup>7</sup>

In Thai, the Anglicism *slam*, (สลัม), from “slum”, is a generic term to designate any form of spontaneous habitat. Some, such as Ban Khrua, (บ้านครัว), have acquired the status of “ancient neighborhoods” or “urban villages” and are targets of speculation from real estate developers (Baffie & Fournie, 1992; Baffie, 2003; Baffie & Pichard-Bertaux, 2011). Other terms make their distinctions based on: 1) The tendency for communitarianism, I.e. *chumchon*, (ชุมชน), from *chumchon ae-at* (ชุมชนแออัด) meaning overcrowded community, contrasting with the actual cosmopolitan condition that prevails in the enclaves; 2) The “degradation of the site”, i.e. *laeng sueam-som*, (แหล่งเสื่อมโทรม), or *laeng thrut som*, (แหล่งทรุดโทรม), contrasting with the actual rectilinear alignment of the barracks in the enclaves, most of them being well maintained; and 3) A parallel with the “camp”, *khai*, (ค่าย), with associations of confinement or encampment. Actually, the enclaves cannot be compared with military barracks, *khai thahan*, (ค่ายทหาร), and not even with “refugee camps”, *khai phulipai*, (ค่ายผู้ลี้ภัย), such as those on the Myanmar-Thai border (Vongrattanatoh, 2011, p. 140). Refugee status is by no means the primary claim of migrant workers established in the enclaves; it would rather be that of “citizenship” on condition of being able to prove twenty years of residence in Thailand, which is rarely the case and very difficult to demonstrate (Robinne, 2021).

The Burmese terminology to designate precarious habitats is also loose: 1) *sekhmu zone* (စက်မှုဇုန်) is a Pali-Burmese-English expression meaning “industrial zone” on the outskirts of cities; 2) *kyukyaw*

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7. On this subject, see Vongrattanaroh (2011). For a more global approach to the terminology questions posed by contemporary migratory flows, see Calabrese & Veniard (2018) and Fogel (2019).

(ကျူးကျော်) refers to spontaneous settlements which “overflow” or “encroach” on public space and which are therefore susceptible to expropriation; 3) *dukhathee sakhan* (ဒုက္ခသည်စခန်း) with the word Pali *dukha*, “problem, suffering”, followed by Burmese word *sakhan*, “camp, lodging, place”, refers to refugee camps; and 4) *hkohlone* (ခိုလှုံ), this verbal or nominal expression means “refuge, asylum, to take refuge, to shelter”, it also designates “squats”. None of these terms are really satisfactory for describing the inner-city enclaves. A more appropriate term might be the Burmese expression *aloqthama tanlya* (အလှိုင်သမားတန်းလျား) with its literal meaning of “alignment of workers”, as one would describe an alignment of chairs in a classroom or of houses in a residential area.

More expressive than “alignment”, it is ultimately the English term “enclave” which seems most appropriate for the idea of bounded territories at the very heart of a city, something geologists may call “fragments of rocks foreign to the mass in which they are included”. In her work on gated communities in Dubai, Laavany Kathiravelu draws a distinction between “enclaves” - the rows of wealthy middle-class houses, also in Bangkok - and “camps” which she applied to the corrugated iron alignments reserved for migrant workers (2016). Beyond the fact that the corrugated iron alignments are located in one case on the outskirts of Dubai and in the other in the center of Bangkok, the qualifier of “camps” seems decidedly inappropriate because of its connotation of ghettoization, variable conditions of hygiene, privacy and security (Agier, 2013a; Bernardot, 2008; Dilger & Dohrn, 2016). Given the sites under definition are semi-landlocked territories included in a broader urban environment, with free though strictly controlled access, the term “enclaves” is retained. The qualifier “migrant workers” can be added to avoid any confusion with the gated communities of opulent houses as there are in Dubai and in Bangkok.

Faced with the vagueness of the related Thai and Burmese vernacular terminologies to designate this new cosmopolitan and transnational form of urban habitat, reference to exogenous terminology will help to distinguish the real estate enclaves in the city center from industrial zones of the periphery as well as more or less precarious forms of housing reflected in the vernacular terminologies. I selected five terms from a long list of possibilities:

“Ephemeral” is the first qualifier I use to describe the enclaves themselves as well as the life inside them, in contrast with the sustainability which characterizes the “urban villages” of central Bangkok and the industrial zones of the periphery as well.<sup>8</sup> “Ephemeral” is the vacancy of urban plots that real estate developers covet continuously; “ephemeral” are the enclaves themselves whose characteristic is precisely displacement, a displacement which further underlines the recent apparition of containers made by definition for travel; “ephemeral” is the material chosen for the barracks and enclosures, corrugated iron sheet as easy to dismantle as it is to transport and assemble elsewhere; “ephemeral” is the duration of the stay within the same enclave, from six to fifteen months on average; “ephemeral” are the work teams sharing a site, the principle of which is rotation from one site to another without the composition of a work team being necessarily the same from one site to another.

“Mobile” is second. One cannot imagine the ephemeral character of places without evoking the mobility of people. Not to mention the years of wandering, months or years after crossing the border, mobilities in the plural, from one city to another and between different employers in the same city. Or the displacement of the enclaves themselves, predestined as they are to be moved. Or the rotations and renewals of work teams according to the progress of the building under construction, moving from one enclave to another to join a new site, once a year visiting families during the Buddhist New Year holidays, with an irregular return to the border crossing point for a periodic check of formal papers at the place of first registration in Thailand. Mobility is certainly one of the dominant features of people in exile, but, in contrast to sedentary work in factories, it is even more dominant in the enclaves thanks to the rotation of construction sites; after thirteen years in Thailand, Soe Ta Oo (စိုးတာဝို), a resident of the Rama IX enclave, had gone through nine employers, not counting odd jobs at the border (personal communication, April 29, 2017).

“Stealthy” is third. Inside the enclaves, between the passageways, from room to room, from rooms to water reservoirs, to and from shopkeepers’ stalls, there are punctuated, permanent comings and

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8. On this subject, Baffie (2003), Baffie & Fournier (1992) and Pongsawat (2007).

goings; a silent anthill, day and night. This is an improbable silence compared to the promiscuity that reigns in the enclaves and the muting resonance of the corrugated iron sheets. The silence is even more improbable given the fact that each enclave or group of enclaves is located in the heart of the liveliest and often most upscale districts of Bangkok. The enveloping and exclusive silence of the migrants without their current administrative papers serves to keep them out of the limelight, the process of self-insertion into the megalopolis here being for the purpose to better disappear rather than to better integrate. Despite the adoption of the Thai and Burmese languages as an interchangeable vernacular, strong accents complicate this objective of blending into anonymity.

“Fragmented” is fourth. Under the “one job, one room” rule, only people with an employment contract are allowed to reside in the enclaves, a rule which de facto excludes young children as well as spouses not employed by the company. As soon as the weaning of infants is over, the parents, generally the mother, must deliver them to relatives remaining in Burma, or entrust them to family members living in Thailand in order to ensure their future Thai nationality. The mother is usually back in the enclave a few weeks later, provided of course her employment contract is still valid or has been renewed.

Ma Nyi Nyi (မညီညီ), a Pa-O Burmese female, was twenty-nine years old when I met her in 2017. She left Burma at the age of fourteen with her mother and was married at seventeen. She has two daughters, aged four and six years, both born in Bangkok. She took them to the country at the age of three months for the youngest, seven months for the oldest. She and her husband return to visit them about every three years. Reunions between migrant workers and their children can be even less frequent. Sai Soe Win Aung (စိုင်းစိုးဝင်းအောင်) and his wife did not see their daughter once for over four years. Ko Than Naing (ကိုသန်းနိုင်) and his wife have only seen their son twice in thirteen years. Ko Thay Lwin (ကိုဌေးလွင်) saw his eldest daughter for the first time when it was decided to bring her back in the Bangkok to work, she was fourteen at the time, now nineteen in 2019; both reside in the same dilapidated enclave of Rama IX Rd (personal communication, March 13, 2019).

“Disposable” is fifth. This was how migrant workers felt, like something inexpensive and replaceable, when on March 23, 2020, 9,000 of them rushed back to the Thai-Myanmar border before it was closed by the Thai authorities at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike factories of the industrial zone at the outskirts of the megalopolis, construction sites were not interrupted. Under these conditions, the massive return of migrant workers included only a marginal proportion of enclave residents, despite the increased risk of COVID-19 infection due to the promiscuity that reigns in the enclaves. But these five qualifiers are certainly not exhaustive; we could add “precarious”, “insecure”, “violent”, “diffuse identity” etc. But whether it concerns the real estate plots on which the enclaves are built, the rotation of work teams and the workers themselves, or even the separation of families and obstacles to any form of communitarianism, everything contributes to distinguishing the enclaves of the city center from any other form of exile living condition. Their territorial isolation is combined with social isolation, a trend further reinforced by the social distancing that the residents of the enclaves maintain with regard to the associative offer.



**Figure 2.4:** *Enclave on Rama IX*

## 4. Prospects for Associative Relationships

It is an understatement to say that enclaves produce hierarchy and frontiers, given their emplacement in social crossroads where opposites coexist without meeting, or meet at the margin unintentionally: “registered illegal immigrants” (Saltsman, 2015) go side by side with national and international white collar workers, multiple mobilities and fragmented families oppose sedentary lifestyles and settled family nuclei, plots for construction sit in contrast to lived-in residential districts, the horizontality of the barracks at the foot of skyscrapers; zinc and iron versus concrete and glass walls.

One of the primary characteristics of frontiers, whether territorial or conceptual, is the crossing, the very idea of crossing should be consubstantial to exile. Crossing symbolic borders in time of rites of passage or other rituals, crossing political borders through mutual aid networks, or crossing community borders to which the associative environment gives access – a threshold crossing, whatever its nature, operates on the notion of a sense of common belonging. A cornerstone of community membership in a transnational context, it is from religious bodies and the associative sphere that a community membership in exile draws its vitality and can maintain an indirect link with the mother country. Paradoxically, it is precisely in the absence of crossing in which the social bond is expressed, in the absence of any ritual or associative form by which community membership is created, it is in a way by default that residents of the enclaves position themselves on the margin of all social life compared to other categories of urban migrant workers, factory workers and domestic workers as well.

However, the diversity of associative offers made available to migrant workers theoretically places the residents in the enclaves on equal footing. Three types of religious, educational and health services are made available to migrants. The general criteria that prevailed in their choices correlates with those of the particular informants I accompanied to the places they usually frequent.

#### 4.1 Associativeness through Religion

Among the many monasteries in Bangkok, several are famous for bringing together a large Burmese community in the broad sense of the national term, any ethnic, linguistic or cultural affiliation combined. Most of these monasteries are found on the outskirts, near industrial areas and the cities attached to them. This is the case of Wat Chak Daeng (วัดจากแดง), a monastery located in the southwest of the megalopolis. The abbot is at the head of a hundred monks, among whom seven venerable monks, *upazin* (ဦးဝဇင်) and five novices, *koyin* (ကိုရင်), are of Burmese origin. The abbot is Thai himself, but spent twelve years of his life in Burma and preaches in the Burmese language. Each year, during the full moon phases, charismatic monks from Burma are invited to the wat. It was during one of his stays in Burma that the abbot of Wat Chak Daeng met the venerable Pinya Siri (အရှင်ပညာသိရီ), a monk of Mon origin whose fame is partly due to breeding some thousand heads of humpback cows; a monk breeder when others are monk builders or monk planters, their deeds always accounted in the immeasurable, adding to their extraordinary sanctity. The invitation was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Mitta Foundation.<sup>9</sup> Each year announced on social media, the preaching event on the sixth day of the rising moon of the month of Kason (ကဆုန်), falling in March/April, brings together several hundred faithful, most of them Burmese-origin migrant workers living in the megalopolis.

The tendency towards communitarianism in certain monasteries can be much more pronounced. This is the case for example of Wat Nakhon In (วัดนครินทร์) in Nonthaburi District (นนทบุรี) in northern Bangkok, which has several monks of Karen origin with Thai citizenship. Inter-monastic and transnational relations are here based on the Karen Dana Association (KDA), the “Association of Karen Donations”, which is in charge of the coordination of three networked monasteries: 1) the well-known monastery of Mount Zwegabin (ဇွဲကဝင်တောင်) perched on a rocky promontory overlooking the Salween River (သံလွင်မြစ်),

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9. The Kalyana Mitta Development Foundation (KMF) was initiated as a Buddhist Youth Empowerment Program in 2008 and officially registered as a local NGO in 2013. KMF is working with youths of the social change movements, teachers, university students, Sangha and local communities.

south of Hpa-An City (ဘားအံမြို့), capital of Karen State (ကရင်ပြည်နယ်); 2) the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon (အပြည်ပြည်ဆိုင်ရာ ထေရဝါဒဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ သာသနာပြု တက္ကသိုလ်), 3) Wat Nakhon on the northern outskirts of Bangkok. Such an institutional triangulation between a monastic site at the regional level and two centers located in Bangkok and Yangon is representative of transnational Buddhist networks.

The KDA functions through an executive committee of ten venerable ones, all Karen from different countries, which deliberates twice a year. They select student applicants for an international mobility scholarship from India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand. The total sum of \$11,500 USD collected in 2018 benefited three monks enrolled in doctorate theses in theology, as well as thirty-six other bonzes at license and master's degree levels. U Kundata is one of the lucky ones; his scholarship allowed him to benefit from a one-year study visa in Thailand in order to prepare for a doctorate. Another monk who joined the discussion said it was at the invitation of a disciple and funded by anonymous donations. This year, the KDA celebrates two monks who defended their doctorates in India, the “Venerable Doctors” Ariwawunsa (အရီယဝံသ) and Okkamsa (ဥက္ကံသ) whose photos appear at the top of the calendar for the year 2563 of the Thai Buddhist era, 1381 of the Burmese era and 2020 of the Christian era.

Similar to Buddhist networks, Christian movements of Southeast Asia are also organized into transnational networks involved both in proselytism and in supporting, on a community basis, migrants through various associative environments, charities, youth and women organizations, orphanages, gospel songs and choruses, bible reading circles and sermons, educational and professional training etc. (Baujard, 2009; 2010; Horstmann, 2011). The Church of Christ is one of the active poles of the Hong Kong Association of Christian Missions (HKACM) consortium founded in the 1970s (Bourdeaux & Jammes, 2016, p. 44), with a strong presence in Burma – especially in the Chin, Kachin and Karen states – as well as in Thailand; since the late 1980s, it has been one of the five Christian denominations recognized by the Thai Ministry of Education (Buadaeng, 2003, p. 209). In Bangkok, on Ratchadewi, *soi* 24, the Church of Christ counts among its faithful approximately one hundred and fifty families originating from Burma,

that is to say 1/5th of the total Burmese community affiliated with the churches of Christ in Bangkok. The community groups generated by places of worship, Christian or Buddhist, are at the origin of important networks which actively participate in the activities of the community thus formed; to the extent of course that one is affiliated to one or more of these charitable or educational networks.

#### **4.2 Associativeness through Education**

Unlike religious congregations which combine proselytism and educational missions, associations dedicated to the training of migrants are mostly secular, though they may still be under religious supervision. Two such associations established in Bangkok and its surroundings were explored for this chapter under guidance from informants, judged to be representative of the associative environments frequented by migrant workers. If the two are considered in relation to their size and the nature of their tutelage, then their educational project is very similar. The main subjects taught are English and Thai languages, together with computer science as a main curriculum, plus a few more fun and social subjects, secondary in appearance, but actually of prime importance in terms of social ties.

Dear Burma Academy (DBA), the first association, is located in a *soi* on Ratchadewi, one of the liveliest districts of Bangkok, near the Church of Christ but without any connection to it. The NGO is a branch of the Thai Asian Committee for Democracy in Burma. Because the DBA is dedicated to the education and training of migrant workers, it faces multiple administrative difficulties, although all students admitted must have valid papers. The academy is secular and apolitical. It has forty-five employees, including thirty-two teachers for around six hundred students (535 this year compared to 620 last year). Students are mostly Burmese ethnicities, but there are also some from Cambodia and Laos. All of them are young people, with an average age of between eighteen and twenty-five years old, some having initially joined a family member in exile, and none of them presenting any particular professional skills. The goal of U Myint Way (ဦးမြင့်ဝေ), the director of the academy, is to “intellectualize” these young people by making them understand that education provides the means to escape precariousness. “My role is to develop critical thinking

in them, to make them understand on the fact that to oppose is a right”, (personal communication, April 29, 2017). The open restaurant at the entrance of the school is an important place of conviviality, friendliness, and solidarity, as were the sewing and make-up classes scheduled during my last visit in 2019.

The students have a similar background and profile. Ko Maw Aung Thein (ကိုမော်အောင်သိန်း), sixteen years old in 2013 when he arrived in Bangkok, twenty-three years old today, is single and has never been to school other than a monastic one. He joined his maternal cousin in a city hotel as a dishwasher, then moved to a hotel with seventy predominantly Burmese employees. Ko Nyunt Win (ကိုညွန့်ဝင်း), about twenty years old, single, is son of a reformed alcoholic father who became a monk. He joined a friend to work for five months in a plastic bag factory, then in a stationery factory with a majority Shan and Karen workforce, and is now housed by his employer in a dormitory. Ma Sanda (မစန္ဒာ) and her girlfriend, both Baw Karen, were sixteen or seventeen years old when they arrived to Bangkok in 2012, both single domestic workers; Ma May Phyu (မမေဖြူ), married, has children aged nine and two years old, is a daughter of rice farmers, now inactive for health reasons. She has changed employers three times and currently works in a sugar factory with housing provided by the company. Ma Cho (မချို), Baw Karen, aged about sixteen when she arrived to Bangkok, twenty years old today, is single and has been a babysitter for six years for the same Sino-Thai family. Her two brothers are in Yangon and her mother comes to visit her sometimes. The vast majority of these students are single and have an unskilled job in a factory or in private homes (students of the DBA, personal communication, January 3, 2019).

The second association, Yadanasein (ရတနာစိန်) Education Development (YED) is in many ways comparable to the DBA but is more decentralized and under religious supervision. The chairman who presides over the general assemblies and presentation of the accounts each week is a venerable native of Mogok in Shan State. For several years now, he has been the superior of a monastery in Bang Khrae (บางแค), an industrial district on the outskirts of Bangkok, a high place of residence for monks from all over the world “which regularly brings us police raids,” he points out (personal communication, October 5,

2015). Language courses in Thai and English and computer science make up the concentration of the curriculum. In total, the YED brings together some two hundred students supervised by about fifteen volunteers of Burmese origin.<sup>10</sup>

YED opened four years ago, founded in partnership with the Labor Rights Promotion Network (LRPN) in Samut Sakhon (สมุทรสาคร), about a hundred kilometers southwest of Bangkok. Also known as Mahachai (มหาชัย), this is one of the main transit points for Burmese migrants, especially those working in the notorious sector of industrial fishing. About 500,000 migrant workers live there in transit, according to staff of the Aid Alliance Committee for Myanmar Workers (AAC) association.

### ***4.3 Associativeness through Health Services***

The headquarters of the AAC is also in Mahachai. As a moral authority, the monks contribute financially to the association, donating part of the offerings they receive. In 2017 the AAC had only nine members, all volunteers. About thirty workers who had been seriously injured at work were accommodated, but the number was expected to climb to around 100 the following year, in 2018; rows of corrugated iron barracks identical to those found in the enclaves had been hastily constructed to house them. Following Thailand's new drastic migration policy of 2018, a police check forced the scattering and arrest of several of the residents for residency-related issues such as obsolete administrative documents. Water and electricity cuts ensued, making the activities of the center particularly difficult. Less seriously injured migrant workers are not supposed to stay at the AAC beyond a few days, the time needed for them to receive first aid and assert their rights by trying to obtain financial compensation from their employers. In 2016, the association had recorded eighteen official deaths, those cases being the subject of official procedures repatriating bodies. However, the number of deaths due to undeclared work accidents is much higher, around sixty deaths annually according to the association's officials.

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10. For more details, see Robinne (2021).

AAC mediates between employees and employers, helping workers achieve better outcomes in discussions with companies. Migrant workers are supposed to live within the limits of the area of the Thai customs office that they were first registered at. Most of them break this regulation to go to Bangkok or elsewhere to look for a job, de facto risking their legal rights. Only a company can issue a health card after recruitment. The advantages of these cards are marginal, except for pregnant women who receive continuing care; the days of post-natal care are also covered. In addition to the fact that it can only be used once, the health card excludes the cost of food and drugs, which must be met by patients. The very poor reception reserved for patients holding such cards is upheld without exception. This is only further reason for migrant workers to avoid the only public hospital – the Ratchawithi Government Hospital near Victory Monument (อนุสาวรีย์ชัยสมรภูมิ) – where these migrant health cards are accepted. In such conditions, rather than acting to enable the provision of medical assistance, holding a health card is rather seen as a form of incomplete integration, a sort of sign of safe-conduct proving that you are in good standing with the administration.

#### **4.4 Social Mediation**

Like churches and monasteries, associative movements, secular or religious, play a preponderant unifying role by which otherwise isolated migrant workers come together for intercession exchanges at regular intervals and around which community support is mobilized. The periodicity inherent to ritual forms – whether they are religious on the occasion of ceremonies, or secular such as tuitions and school exams – establishes the idea of common belonging in a migratory context where protean fragmentation otherwise prevails, whether in social, family, religious, linguistic or cultural fields. Whatever the frequency of meetings, on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis, it is on cyclical notions that senses of common belonging take shape and structure. It is in the repetition of ritual occurrences – ‘ritual’ in the broad sense – that the community draws its consistency.

In a context of intense competition, the associative offer must show, on the one hand, its propensity to expand its curriculum and, on the other hand, its ability to break the conditions of isolation and

precariousness.<sup>11</sup> In his reference book *The Cosmopolitan Condition*, Michel Agier reminds us that the intrinsic fragility of any community ideal requires reactivating the community tie at regular intervals (2013a, pp. 32-33). From a sociological point of view, rituality and cyclicity are the *modus operandi*; if these renewed opportunities for social integration are shattered or disintegrated, it is the whole system that is undermined.



**Figure 2.5:** Karen ceremony at Wat Nakhon

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11. See in this regard the works of Dudley (2007), Horstmann (2011) and Pongsawat (2007).

## 5. Social Distancing Policy

The associative environment is the keystone of community bonds where the situation of exile contributes either to make random or, on the contrary, to reinforce. This holds for whatever its nature, whether predominantly religious as with organizations placed under the patronage of monasteries and churches, or resolutely secular for others. The policy pursued in the enclaves is a counter example. As unstable as it is, the community bond in the enclaves is essentially limited to vacant places in the passageways between rows of barracks, between adjoining rooms, or even within work teams; but this tendency towards community regrouping remains in fact very marginal, because the residents obviously do not have control over the allocation of rooms, a tendency which the short circuit of multiple mobilities undermines anyway. “We never get used to it,” confided a resident of the enclave in Asok, eight months pregnant, whose departure to an enclave in another city was scheduled for two days later. “We never get used to it” is a feeling widely shared.

In this anxiety-provoking context where social fragmentation, financial insecurity and administrative violence predominate, I cannot here detail the obstacle course of obtaining the various papers, which new laws then make quickly obsolete (Robinne, 2021); nor can I detail the pressure of multiple police checks and the cunning of the brokers who stand in front of the embassy. In this context where emotional loneliness and family breakdowns prevail, the regularity of meetings through the associative environment usually contributes to breaking the confinement of exile; ‘usually’, because urban enclaves de facto place their residents on the fringes of this relational system.

In a more or less direct way, the associative movements also play the role of social elevator. I think of Ma Htway (မာထွေး), thirty-five years old in 2017, who opened a shoe store in her hometown of Hpa-An in Karen State, after nine years in Thailand as a housekeeper with seven employers. I think of Ko Myint, first employed in a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur with a two-year employment contract, after which he became illegal; he finally obtained the status of political refugee and received a famous green card, the gateway to the USA where he is now a factory worker. I also think of Soe Myint Aung (စိုးမြင့်အောင်), thirty-nine years

old, and his wife, thirty-one years old, twenty years in Thailand for him, seventeen years for her; he first worked in a hotel in *soi* Nana where he met his wife, then became a worker in a clothing factory, later combined this activity with that of translator for Burmese citizens who came to Bangkok for medical reasons, and finally was recruited by the Myanmar Embassy in Thailand, in the department dedicated to migrant workers. All were integrated during their years of exile in the associative environment. It is certainly not the associative environment that makes for success but being integrated into it constitutes an important vector of social mobility. The few examples of “success stories” – to use the usual Anglicism – I encountered to date have in common that they have gone through associative circles. It is remarkable that, unlike the overwhelming majority of the exiled workers established in the center or in the outskirts of Bangkok - such as factory workers, hotels and restaurants workers, domestic workers, or market employees - , the inhabitants of the urban enclaves don't get involved in any of the religious, educational or health-related associative movements. It is not a trend; it is a constant.

The cosmopolitan condition that prevails in the enclaves is by no means expressed in terms of partnerships and networks, whether secular or religious. Of course, with very rare exceptions, commercial transactions are not allowed outside of the staff; religious services are also prohibited and external marks of religious affiliation are mostly reduced to a few posters stuck inside the rooms. Actually, it is not so much ritual practices that are restrained as any form of gathering, all the more notable as religious and/or associative offers are readily available to migrant workers in the city, as we have seen. The mesh of relational dynamics which brings consistency to social crossroads elsewhere is not operative in these enclaves of migrant workers. At different levels, it is an attitude of self-distancing towards the three major forms of sociability at their disposal that prevails in the enclaves. These are:

- 1) Distancing from social life via social networks. If the residents of the enclaves remain most of the time connected, this does not go beyond the virtual space in which the dial of their mobile phone confines them. They thus keep each other digitally informed of administrative developments concerning migrant workers,

accidents affecting each other and the labor market without social grouping in physical space.

- 2) They justify distancing from associative offers by a lack of free time and interest. Their relationship to churches and monasteries is indirect and, in the continuity of the previous remark concerning “social networks”, it is by computer subscription that a minority of the residents in the enclaves contribute twice a year to the religious offering.
- 3) Distancing from family networks with remittances and returns are always distant. To the slow extension of the remittance periodicity corresponds a disintegration of family relationships, to the point where the very idea of returning home vanishes confusedly into limbo (Cung Liang Hu Chin, 2018).

Based on an estimated average salary of 9,000 to 11,000 Thai Baht (THB, 1 THB equally approximately 0.030 USD) per month including overtime,<sup>12</sup> migrant workers remit around 4,000 THB/month, or roughly a third of their salary, beyond which the budget balance seems complicated. The differences can however be quite variable. Ma Ee Shway Mun (မအေးရွှေမုံ), a 29-year-old volunteer at the DBA, had been in Thailand for six years, and was two years ago recruited into an import/export company. Her salary is 13,000 THB/month and she sends around 9,000 THB/month to her parents, which is more than half of what she earns. “Because sending money to my parents is why I came to Bangkok,” she argues (personal communication, January 5, 2019).

Soe Ta Oo (စိုးတာဝို) is in charge of drilling the basement of a building site and driving in the supporting posts, a dangerous activity requiring constant attention. The brow bone injury? “It’s nothing,” he says. Unable to work for three days and on ‘sick leave’ without pay, he has been in Thailand for a total of thirteen years, and twelve for his wife, both present now for five months on the Rama IX site. Soe Ta Oo

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12. Overtime pays around 60 THB/hour, mainly for extended work in the evening or night work. Depending on the urban environment, Sunday can be a break because of the risk of complaints about sound disturbances from the neighborhood.

considers himself to have come out quite well from his accident, a shock to the brow bone with a steel beam weighing several hundred kilos, especially since his employer covered the costs for the stitches. He earns 400 THB/day or about 12,000 THB/month, barely lower than that of Ma Ee Shway Mun. The two worker's living conditions are however very different from the point of view of the possibilities of family and community mutual aid. Ma Ee-Shway-Mun is integrated into a network of strong sociability from which Soe Ta Oe does not benefit, either because he keeps himself away from the associative environment, or because he was forced to expand his family ties. He remits around 3,000 to 3,500 THB/month. At the time of interview, it had been two consecutive months since he had sent anything because his injury required treatment, and he does not know when he will be able to remit again. Whatever the reasons for this delay, and there are many - medical costs, the cost of making papers compliant, the cost of travel to border posts to have the papers endorsed, undue payments to officials during administrative procedures and police checks, sums demanded by essential intermediaries, expenses related to returning home if possible once a year, loaning money to a friend, or simply the cost of daily living in Bangkok - debt is a recurring trap from which the residents in the enclaves struggle to escape. Because here, in the associative and family solitude of the barracks, no form of mutual aid is able to alleviate the spiral of debt.

Despite the importance of the remittance's share of the total salary, an erosion of social capital correlates with delays in sending money to the family; the disintegration of family relationships is a phenomenon recorded on a constant basis. It is in terms of reciprocity that a cog is put in place of which remittance constitutes the pivot. When the return on investment is broken - and this is common in such a context of precariousness and vulnerability to which are added low income and recurring debt - generalized frustration sets in (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Cung Liang Hu Chin, 2018). Frustration for the religious bodies who through their networks helped a migrant worker go abroad, frustration for family members left behind looking after of children, frustration also for the residents themselves for whom the breach of the social contract is experienced as a personal failure, the regular sending of remittances being the main reason for leaving for the transnational. It is their whole social capital that is gradually called into question.

Whether it is the village networks in the highlands of Burma or the associative networks set up transnationally, the cosmopolitan condition is an essential vector of the identity formation it generates. Whether they are of an economic, matrimonial, religious or even conflictual nature, networks of exchanges and mutual aid networks are all concomitant to social formations. In the case of the enclaves in downtown Bangkok, the cosmopolitan condition is combined with a withdrawal into oneself. This distance from all social life – or from a social life essentially reduced to the two confinement spaces that are the construction site and the barracks – is a distinctive fact of the enclaves. A passage comes back to me from *La Condition Cosmopolite* about these “off-site” (*hors lieu*) camps, where the fact of “living” in a foreign camp is “not being in the world, not living in a place” (Agier, 2013a, p. 106) or as Adam Saltsman would say about the so called “buffalo enclosure” camp near Mae Sot (แม่สอด), “both inside and outside the urban space ... a third world” (2015, p. 17).

It is through negation that the residents of the enclaves position themselves in their relationship to the world. How could it be otherwise? How can the crossing of a threshold such as those found in enclaves create social ties when the established rule is fragmentation? How can the language of dispersion therefore find its necessary sociological consistency in the absence of any common grammar?<sup>13</sup> Neither “non-places” although interchangeable and impersonal (Augé, 1992), nor strictly speaking outside the world, because they are so cruelly within the world as a residual form of globalization, the enclaves have neither the coherence proper to bonded community formations – as are supposed to be in ethnic groups - nor the consistency of crossroads spaces based on a bundle of partnerships; from every point of view, the enclaves of central Bangkok are a territory of desocialization. To wonder how much of this is by choice or through constraint, is in a way to answer the question.

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13. For a discussion of this concept of “consistency” and of “holding together” a heterogeneous territory, see Deleuze & Guattari (1980, p. 398), a problematic discussed also in Robinne (2021).

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