Capturing Otherness: Self-Identity and Feelings of Non-Belonging Among Educated Burmese in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper explores the subjective experiences of migrants engaged in producing alternative modes of self-identification and in creating a new basis for their collective identity. Through the analysis of personal narratives, this article examines the dialectic movement between complex political and social constructions of Otherness and processes of self-identification among English-educated lowland Burmese living in Thailand. It investigates the meanings and perceptions attached to the different terms used as identity frameworks in popular discourse among Thai and among Burmese themselves and looks into how these terms and attached meanings are appropriated and acted upon in different contexts. The migrants involved in this research come from vastly different backgrounds and ideologies, but they share in common being from the Burman ethnic majority, or having lived and studied among Burman, and identifying themselves in terms of civic identity, which is reflected by the term ‘Burmese’. Once in Thailand, their situation is complicated because in their everyday life they have to face the Thai construction of being Burmese, known as ‘Pama’, a term associated with the historical enemy in Thai nationalist discourse. The contact that educated Burmese have with Thai classmates or co-workers is relatively limited due to the general mistrust Thai people tend to have towards them. The educated Burmese migrants also have to confront their national Other, the members of minorities from the secessionist states who compose the majority of migrants in Thailand. In this context, their own Burmeseness, which they rarely had to question before they left Yangon or Mandalay, appears suddenly as it is, an identity deeply fragmented that needs to be captured and reappropriated.

Keywords

Burma/Myanmar; Thailand; migration; identity; feeling of belonging

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Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa. The asymmetry in power relationships is central to the construction of otherness. Only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity (its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness) while imposing corresponding discriminatory measures. Western categories of identity and otherness, transmitted through the universalist claims of religion and science and forcibly imposed through colonization, have thus become pertinent far beyond the boundaries of the West. Although this article only discusses Western constructions of otherness, this does not mean that other societies are unaware of the process.