

**Village Transnationalism:
Transborder Identities among
Thai-Isan Migrant Workers in Singapore¹**

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Abstract

Based on an ethnographic fieldwork among Thai-Isan (the Northeastern Thai), male migrant workers in Singapore's construction industry in 2004, I propose 'village transnationalism' as a conceptual model to understand the transnationalization and globalization processes from below. Exclusively hailed from the countryside's working-class and farming background, Thai-Isan migrant workers have redefined their transborder identities by relying on their limited cultural and symbolic capitals from their home villages to survive hardship as '3D workers on 3D jobs' in a foreign land. My primary aim is to engage in the current 'transnational turn' in the anthropology of border-crossing and international migration studies. It is argued that village transnationalism as an analytical as well as explanatory model could be applicable to some extents to other forms of contracted migrant workers (i.e., construction worker, domestic worker, farm/plantation worker), especially in the intensively constricted and highly regulated contexts of Southeast Asian countries.

Keywords: village transnationalism, transborder identities, contracted migrant worker, Thai-Isan/Northeastern Thailand

Transnationalism from Below³

Sorachai, 30, a male construction worker from Udon Thani, Northeastern Thailand, spoke on behalf of his fellow workers stating "You know what! Thai workers in Singapore are all under a very heavy pressure on their shoulders."⁴ With their average daily wage of 23SGD (14USD; 552THB), they have to burden the bondage debts, which they borrow from relatives or private money-lenders to pay job placement agents in order to secure a job in Singapore's construction industry,⁵ and remit money to support their families back home.⁶ They also have to live with the harsh realities in Singapore, where they are often looked down upon as '3D-job workers' as '3D' refers to difficult, dirty, and dangerous in the international migration studies. They speak neither English, nor

Mandarin, thus, are not capable to communicate with the employers and supervisors. They have to obey them obediently as their life totally depends on them.⁷ They have no rights and no voice in their workplace even though their work could be very harmful to their health and life.⁸

In this article, I use ethnography of Thai-Isan migrant workers in Singapore⁹ as an entry point to discuss issues concerning transborder identities and transnationalism in Southeast Asian context (see Ananta and Arifin 2004; Parnwell 2005). My discussion will be conceptually framed and guided by the principal assumption that “...what is transnational is embedded in the local” (Szanton Blanc, Basch, and Schiller 1995:684; see also Kearney 1995; Yeoh, Charney, and Kiong 2003) and “people’s lived realities and ideological constructions... transgress, though they do not always subvert, the territorial boundaries of the nation-state” (Duara 1997:1030). Lived stories and tales of experience possessed and endured by a group of male contract workers from Isan in Singapore should render themselves as one of many localized realities in a specific transnational setting for us to rethink the ongoing international labor migration in this part of the world at the turn of the 21st century. These migrant workers tell stories of what Willis, Yeoh, and Fakhri (2004:11) calls “the materiality of how individuals experience them [state/nation/transnation].” I wish to rethink the transnational identities through lived experiences of these migrant workers by positioning them as a prime candidate to discuss the unfortunate, back-breaking agency of ‘transnationalism from below.’

What does it mean to be Thai-Isan construction workers in Singapore? How do they define themselves? How have they actually lived and worked away from home?

How do they react to their socially marginalized status and stereo-typicalized images ascribed to them by their Singaporean hosts? I argue that viewing Thai (and other foreign) migrant workers as part of the Singapore society and economy is partial and insufficient because they have never been fully integrated or assigned a proper place in this rigidly plural and competitive structure of Singapore society. We cannot understand migrant workers' lives and their temporal communities in Singapore without taking into account "rural based moral community" (Keyes n.d.:36) or "common moral economy" (Keyes 2002:1). The sense of moral economy and community has been persistently redefined and employed as cultural and symbolic capitals to form the foundation of Thai-Isan identities at home. It further renders itself as a key proponent of resource as well as cultural mold for displaced migrant workers to construct their transborder identities away from home. They have worked and lived here, but they have always belonged elsewhere as they have maintained strong emotional, moral, cultural, and economic attachments to their places of origin. Thai-Isan construction workers in Singapore, I argue, need to be resituated and reconceptualized within the framework of 'village-based transnationalism.'

I propose that term "village transnationalism"¹⁰ as an explanatory model as well as an analytical construct to come to terms with lived experience among members of the Thai migrant workers in Singapore. Hired as semi-skilled contract workers in Singapore's construction industry (see Porntipa Atipas 2001; Wong 2000), they have remained rural villagers or farmers at heart despite their increasing personal cross-border mobilities (Hugo 2004:29). Their temporary life in transit, social relations, and communities away from home have very little to do with those of their Singaporean hosts. Their everyday

life has been modeled or refashioned firmly on transcending identities of traditional and cultural worlds back homes in the Thai countryside.

The social life and transborder identities of migrant workers from Thailand or elsewhere should not be viewed as an extended part of Singapore society and culture. They are part the migratory flow of temporarily displaced persons in the late capitalist borderless world, which Ong (1999:10-12) describes as “cultural globalization.” They come to “sell their labor” (*khai raeng*) in this Island Republic, but their home, imagined or real, has never been here. For them, Singapore is their labor marketplace where they come to ‘earn money’ (*ha ngoen*) to pay off their debt bondage and feed their family.¹¹ Their life-style and community networks while working here are modeled upon the ‘village transnationalism,’ which is largely consistent with Parnwell’s (2005:21) explanation that “a continuing cultural-socio-psychological or nostalgic attachment to ‘home’ leads to the persistence of living and acting translocally, and holding on to the ‘myth of temporariness’/denying the ‘myth of return,’ in spite of the growing apparent permanence of residence ‘there’.” The difference in the case of contract workers in Singapore is that the return is the truth, not a myth. Due to Singapore’s strict immigration policy and foreign workers employment laws (see Ewing-Chow 2001; Huang and Yeoh 2003:75-97; Wong 1997:135-167),¹² every migrant worker must return ‘home’ once his work permit expires.

What I intend to do in this article is to reiterate based on my case studies of Thai migrant workers in Singapore that both transnationalism and globalization not only overlap, as Kearney (1995:548) suggests, but also need a localized ground to operate and involve actors with certain characteristics and identities. Smith (2001) characterizes this

specifically localized ground and subject as ‘transnational optic.’ In the case of Thai contract migrant workers in Singapore, it is true that they “move into and indeed create transnational spaces that may have the potential to liberate nationals within them...” (Ibid.:553) and they have possessed multiple identities and have been involved in “multi-stranded social relationships” which “illustrate how they are sustained through multiple overlapping familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political practices that transcend borders” (Szanton Blanc, Basch, and Schiller 1995:684). However, these multiplicities of transborder identities among transnational migrants are not necessarily or totally ‘new.’ Transborder identities are made possible by appropriating and articulating their ‘home’ cultural and symbolic capitals into their new cultural experience away from home with an aide of borderless telecommunication and transportation technologies.

Singapore as a Thai Migrant Destination

The labor migration from the Thai countryside to Singapore has expanded rapidly since its beginning in early 1970s. Wong (2000) coins the term “men who built Singapore” to acknowledge Thai migrant workers’ significant contributions to Singapore’s construction industry and overall economy. They have constituted one of the largest portions in Singapore’s multinational foreign workforce, especially in the construction industry. According to Low (1995), Singapore has always an open door for skilled and professional workers. No unskilled workers were permitted before 1968. In 1970s, Singapore’s policy to import foreign unskilled workers was relaxing for construction and manufacturing sectors. A wholly Singaporean workforce became unrealistic and foreign labor grew, reflected in 72,590 noncitizen and nonresident (foreign) workers in 1970 and 119,483 in 1980, or 11.5 percent and 11.09 percent,

respectively. Huang and Yeoh (2003:80, Table 1) shows a very steady growth in the percentage of foreign workers out of total Singapore's workforce in the last four decades, beginning from 3.2 and 7.4 in 1970 and 1980 to 16.1 and 29.2 in 1990 and 2000, respectively. In 2000, Singapore had a record of 612,200 foreign workers out of its 2,094,800 total workforce. It is estimated that foreign workers will make up more than 60 per cent of Singapore workforce in 2020 (see Rahman 2003:81).

Wong (2000:58) shows that Thai workers have reportedly been coming to Singapore since the early 1970s, but statistics made available by the Thai Ministry of Labour and Social Work date only from 1978 onwards. Boonruang Chunsuvimol (1980) reports that there were around 500 Thai workers first came to Singapore to work in the electronic and textile companies in Jurong in October 1978. It was the beginning of the rapid expansion of the importation of unskilled and semi-skilled workers from Thailand in 1980s and 1990s, which had been sustained by the construction industry boom in Singapore sparked by the gigantic public housing program undertaken by the Housing and Development Board (HDB). During these times, due to the critical shortage of domestic labor, the government allowed workers from "non-traditional sources" (i.e., Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand) to take up employment in the construction sector (Porntipa Atipas (2001:128). By 1981, it was estimated that there was a critical shortage of some 3,000 construction workers daily to work on HDB building sites (Wong 2000:66).

The high demand for menial foreign workers in Singapore's construction industry in mid 1980s had brought not only documented workers, but also undocumented or illegal workers from Thailand and other non-traditional sources to this Island Republic.

The peak of illegal workers seeking for employment was the second half of 1980s. When an amnesty was declared for illegal workers in the country in 1989, almost 10,000 Thais working illegally in the country registered themselves for repatriation, as against 25,000 Thais who were employed with work permits (Wong 2000:58). It was around this time that Singapore authority began to systematize and implement a stricter and more effective policy toward the management of its foreign labor affairs. On the one hand, Singapore has recognized and valued the foreign workers' contribution to the impressive growth of their economy (Wong 2000:63). On the other hand, Singapore needs to find ways to manage their foreign workforce effectively as the international labor migration is delicate, highly dynamic, and complicated issue. Singapore also has to make sure that the rate of its dependency on the imported workforce is not too much to make the whole economy and society risky and vulnerable. Huang and Yeoh (2003:80-81) shows three key measures, namely, the work permit system, the dependency ceiling which regulates the proportion of foreign to local workers and the foreign levy, adopted by Singapore's authorities to manage the unskilled and low-skilled workers as 'a temporary and controlled phenomenon' (see Rahman 2003:62-76).

The presence of Thai workers in Singapore had become major concerns in the formulation of Thailand's labor and foreign relation policies in late 1980s and early 1990s. It captured the public attention as the media reported cases concerning the 'sudden unexplained nocturnal death syndrome' (SUNDS) or fatal sleep syndrome, the poor living conditions, Singapore's strict legal enforcements, and harsh treatments of the workers by some Singaporean employers. Between May 1982 and July 1994, it is reported that 407 Thai young male workers apparently healthy died in their sleep. Nearly

all of them were from Northeastern Thailand (Bangkok Post, September 26, 1994). While Thai authorities, especially the politicians who visited Singapore, citing “poor working and living conditions, poor diet due to low wages and stress [among the workers] as possible causes” (Williams 1990), the Singapore authority and media drew attention to the mysterious death problem, “suggesting that the deaths resulted from Thais cooking their rice in pipes of polyvinyl chloride or PVC...” (Erlanger 1990) and “denied that contract workers are badly treated by employers” (Williams 1990). In 1989, Thai-Singapore relations were severely tested when 10,000 Thais were evacuated from the island republic before a law took effect that allowed illegal immigrants to be punished by canning (Reuters News, April 18, 1990).

Cases involving worksite accidents, crimes, and other illegal activities (i.e., drug, prostitution) among Thai workers in Singapore have been regularly reported in the local Singapore and Thai media throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Some reported cases included the execution of three workers involved in a homicide case in 1996, the widespread of drug use in 2002, and illegal immigrants and prostitutes selling sex in the forest hideout in Woodlands and Lim Chu Kang in 2003. In March 1996, Thai migrant workers Prawit Yaowbutr, Manit Wangjaisuk, Panya Marmontree, Prasong Bunsom and Panya Amphawa were hanged at dawn after having been convicted of the murder of two Indian workers in September 1993 and a Burmese worker in November 1992. Singapore police stated that the men were part of a gang that had staged robberies at series of work-sites. Appeals for clemency by Thai non-governmental groups and representations by Thai officials failed to halt the executions.¹³ In March 2002, a Thai worker in Singapore wrote to *Thai Rath* that Yaa Baa (amphetamine) had substantially widespread among

Thai labors. To make things worse, Singaporean officials pay no attention to this because their citizens do not use the drug. Only Thai labors themselves sell, buy, take the drug and kill each other (*Thai Rath*, March 1, 2002). In September 2003, Singapore police arrested 39 Thai women, 22 Thai women, and 5 Malaysian men camping in makeshift huts in a forested area near Woodlands Industrial Park. These people were suspected as involving in 'selling sex' and other illegal activities (*The Straits Times*, September 25, 2003). The latest statistics obtained from the Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore indicates that from 1997 to 2004 a total of 435 death certificates (*bai morana bat*) were issued. In other words, an average of 54 Thais (almost all of them were migrant workers) were officially reported death every year in Singapore in the past 8 years. The major causes of death are heart failure, worksite accident, illness, murder, and suicide (Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore 2005).

The accurate numbers of Thai migrant workers in Singapore has long been problematic. Both major studies on the subject by Porntipa Atipas (2001) and Wong (2000) admit that numbers of both illegal and legal Thai migrant workers in this country are estimated figures "due to the lack of official data" (Porntipa Atipas 2001:130) and, "no exact figures on the size and composition of the foreign labour workforce in Singapore released by the Ministry of Labour" (Wong 2000:58). My interview with one of the labor councilors at the Office of Labor Affairs, the Royal Thai Embassy also confirms that no-one knows the accurate number of Thai workers, since Singapore has never disclosed this data and only a small portion of Thai workers report themselves to the Office upon their arrival. The statistics reported by Thailand's Ministry of Labour

Affairs is also too broad to establish the actual number of workers present in their workplaces in Singapore.¹⁴

As indicated by Porntipa Atipas (2001) and Wong (2000), the number of Thai workers in Singapore has increased steadily from late 1980s until the present. Indeed, Singapore is the only country receiving Thai labor, which has maintained “the highest degree of continuity in employing Thai labourers during the last decade..., where legal employment figures rose from 25, 000 in 1988 to 50,000 in 1994 and 60,000 by the end of 1997. Thai workers represented one sixth of the total foreign workforce in 1995 (Supang Chantavanich and Andreashausen 2000:2). A recent report by the Office of Labour Affairs in Singapore (2004) indicates that the total numbers of Thai workers in the 2000s seems to be stable around 45,000-50,000, as the arrival of newly-recruited workers has very significantly slowed down. Singapore’s MOM has maintained a tight regulation that foreign workers must pass a standardized skill test since mid 1990s. The worker has to pay a higher job placement fee to the private agencies (between 80,000-100,000 Baht). In addition, Singaporean employers tend to look for workers from cheaper sources such as Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar to replace the Thais, who have received a higher wage as trained and semi-skilled workers. These are the main reasons to prevent more Thai workers coming to Singapore.

The ‘Golden Mile’ Story: Displaced Migrant Villagers and Their Shopping Mall

The foremost popular center for Thai workers in Singapore is the notoriously well-known place called the “Golden Mile Complex” or simply either “Golden” or “Golden Mile” as the Thai workers refer to it among their patriots.¹⁵ This place is also

known among Thai workers as “Golden *Mao*,” literally the golden place [and time], where workers could go out on a drinking spree and get drunk. The picture of Thai-Isan workers gathering in small groups to talk, drink and have fun while lady vendors approach them to sell some snacks are quite commonly found both inside and outside this commercial complex. The peak of the Thai workers’ crowd is during the weekend, especially the first and third weekends of the month, which are the pay days for most Singaporean companies and construction contractors.

The common scene of the busy Golden Mile could be captured through these typical journalistic descriptions (see also Chia 2002/2003).

On Sundays, as many as 5,000 Thais may visit the complex as it has money services open seven days a week, enabling them to send cheques home. The complex is also the terminal for buses linking Hat Yai and Singapore. Many locals and foreigners consider the complex dangerous—full of thieves, brawlers, and killers, and keep away. They see it as dirty, with Thai workers sitting on the floors and footpaths while they drink (Wuth Nontarit 1996)

The Thai crown was right in front of one of the biggest supermarkets in the complex. Some hummed Thai tunes, others were drinking Thai beer. Some had plastic bags of bamboo shoots or raw papaya. Many of them read Thai newspapers. Just around the street corner, some Thai men were drinking cool Thai beer. A Singaporean policemen kept an eye on them (Supara Janchitfah. 2002).¹⁶

In the eyes of both Thai and Singapore officials, the media, and the general public, this three-storey shopping mall on the Beach Road is the ‘3D place for 3D workers.’ Its media representations are rather ambiguous and rather negative. Its identities as a social space have been attached to male workers’ drinking sprees and other illegal activities. Singaporeans have reminded their relatives and friends that this is the

place to avoid. Thai workers are widely regarded as diligent, hard-working, and obedient people in their normal selves, but they can become real-trouble workers when they get drunk.¹⁷ Most Singaporean employers share this stereo-typicalized perception on the quality of Thai-Isan workers. Darren, for example, is quoted as saying that “when they are sober, they are the best workers, But when they get drunk, they can be real trouble makers” (cited in Supara Janchitfah 2002).

The Golden Mile Complex as a public space was embedded in Singapore’s urban development project in the early 1970s. The Complex as it stands today was part of the failed urban renewal program called the Golden Mile district. According to Chia (2002/2003:21-23), the Golden Mile district program derived from the government’s intention to transform the area from a slum into a first class commercial, residential, and hotel district, but it failed miserably due to poor accessibility and competition from developments in the vicinity. Specifically mentioning the Golden Mile Complex alone, it was built in 1972 and originally known as the Wah Hup Complex. It was designed as a mixed-use complex consisting of shops, office units, and residential flats. The business performance of the shops in the Golden Mile Complex was poor and was ‘like a ghost town’ in the early 1970s. However, it has gradually been revived as the Thai workers began to arrive and businesses associated to the Thais flourished in the early 1980s, which is referred to by Chia (2002/2003:22) as “the birth of Little Thailand in Singapore.”

The physical setting of the Golden Mile has not been fixed nor limited only to the three-storey building space. Its boundaries are rather complex, expansive, and flexible particularly during the peak of its business on the weekend. As Thai workers, lady

vendors, cross-border tourists and travelers, and visitors arrive in the area, they have gradually occupied and made use of most of the available spaces within the complex and its surrounding areas. Footpaths and some small vacant spaces in front of the Golden Mile are used as meeting points for passengers. Most of the corridors on the ground floor and the parking lot are occupied by workers for drinking and other leisure activities. A large number of workers also used the spaces provided by the stalls and other available grounds under the HBD flats¹⁸ opposite to the Golden Mile for entertaining activities. Many of them go to the Kallang Riverside Park at the intersection between Beach Road and the Highway and use that area as an alternative leisure space. They sit or squat on the floor to enjoy their drinks, snacks, and food with friends after their long week on construction sites and factories across the Island. It is not unusual to witness bodies of workers who have passed out, lying unconscious on the footpaths or under the HDB flats after long hours of heavy drinking or fighting with other fellow workers.

Most Thai workers have rather contrasting, but balanced views regarding the existence of the Golden Mile as part of their labor migration map. They viewed the Golden Mile in both positive and negative ways. In his diary, Anuchit, 31, a veteran worker from Udon Thani, wrote about the positive aspect of the place, “the Golden Mile is the meeting point for the Thais. Friend, relatives, and people coming from the same village meet here. They also come to have fun on their free time. The Golden Mile has offered all kinds of entertainment such as, Karaoke bars, discotheques, and snooker club. People usually visit the place during the end of the month or on their pay day. Some people come to remit money home, other just come to spend on things they wish to.”¹⁹ Some said, it is the only public space in Singapore where they can truly feel at ‘home,’

for example, Lili (cited in Chia 2002/2003:24) states that “This is really ‘Little Thailand.’ All the shops do not sell Singapore products. Everything is made in Thailand, even the vegetables. Every morning, fresh vegetables from Thailand will come here on buses. Everyday, flowers, padi, chili, and spices will come out from Hat Yai and sent to here. You name it, they have it.”

On the negative side, Thai workers are aware of, and some even strongly express their displeasure and protest against, the jeopardy and noisy drinking scenes in and around the Golden Mile Complex on the weekends. Anuchit wrote in the same diary that “there are both good and bad people coming to the Golden Mile. There are illegal migrants, both male and female, looking for jobs. They go underground hiding with friends. Some occasionally visit the Golden Mile, some illegally hang out and camp in the forests. This is the reason why the police come to inspect the place frequently. The Golden Mile is also the place of sin. Many workers get lost amid some tempting seductions like girls, drugs, and drink. Some people get killed in the fight after heavy drinking. Many forget that they have their families back home under their responsibility. It is heart-breaking for their parents, wives, and children.”²⁰ Janta, 29, agrees that the negative image of the Golden Mile has something to do with the fact that Thai workers come to drink and they drink too much until fights break out.²¹ Some people drink until they pass out and lay unconsciously on the footpaths or the floor, where many of them are pick-pocketed of their personal assets. Nonetheless, a worker insists that it is their place. “I conclude that the place has more pros than cons. I will always go the Golden Mile, no matter what.”²² “Even if its location is remote or far away from my construction site, I will always try to be there.”²³

The Golden Mile on the weekend resembles the festive atmosphere in Isan's rural villages. Mostly middle and advanced aged men, gathering together to have a meal and a drink over fun-making conversation in corners of the buildings or in the parking lots and footpaths, are scenes common to household ceremonies or village festivals (*ngan bun*), especially those during the post-harvest time when villagers might find themselves with the luxury of time to celebrate and enjoy themselves after heavy work in the field. Noise, drinking sprees, enjoying abundant meals together, urinating or spitting in public, or even putting up a fight are all considered normal behavior in village festivals. They are a way of life in village festivals. However, they are also considered 'out of place,' and socially unacceptable. They are categorized as anti-social behavior. Many of them border on being illegal judging from Singapore's legal perspective and the public social norms. Many patriot Thais, who are educated, professionals and middle-class or elite working in Singapore, also see the place as degrading, dirty and exclusively for working-class people. Perhaps, some of outrageous anti-social behaviors during the festive weekends at the Golden Mile could be interpreted also as a signifier of 'slapping-your-face' expression or protestation against the strictly regulated nature of Singapore everyday life as well as a way to reflexively apprehend their own marginalized life and hardship.

The Golden Mile and Thai-Isan migrant workers should be viewed within and from their own existing contexts. As transnational contract workers, they have found themselves caught up in an extraordinarily complex situation. They live their 'labor-selling life' (*chiwit khon khai raeng*) as temporarily physically displaced and culturally uprooted persons. They have become men without families or village communities in a rather sudden and cruel manner over a sustained period of time. They are young men

away from parental and customary influence, husbands separated from wives, fathers far away from their children, and good community members leaving behind relatives and neighbors. Many of them are frustrated with unfriendly and discriminatory gestures from their Singaporean employers and people they meet on their worksites and within everyday life.²⁴ In other words, they have become mentally, culturally and socioeconomically handicapped strangers in an unfamiliar workplace and society. What the Singapore public has witnessed over the weekends at the Golden Mile is in part the Thai workers' imagined attempts to keep in touch and reinforce their nostalgic sense of Isan village-style 'home' and public festival. They unconsciously wish to make the Golden Mile their 'home' and 'community' in their own impossible way, given Singapore's strict law enforcement and the public attitude toward foreign workers.

The Golden Mile has offered Thai workers not only a 'mirrored sense' of home and community, but also a 'real, touchable' physical communality in transit. It is perhaps the only place in Singapore where Thai workers can come together and make a 'village' out of their virtual social networks, which, during weekdays, are kept to a minimum through face-to-face contact and via popular mobile phones. A large number of Thai workers possess mobile phones and wireless technology has made it possible for them to keep alive their placeless social network and community through instant live chat and SMS messages.²⁵ It is indeed a 'contact zone' for the Thai migrant workers in this ethnoculturally pluralized Island Republic, where groups of foreign workers need their marked home away from home's social and physical space. As this shopping mall's spatial identities marked by Thai-style fresh market, village festival atmosphere and a miniature of famous Bangkok-based Erawan shrine as its major spiritual demarcation, it

should be understandable why Thai-Isan workers are easily stimulated and fling themselves deep into their rare joyful mood away from their menial hardship on the construction sites throughout the Island of Singapore.

Pha Pa Raeng Ngan:
Transborder Buddhist Merit-Making Endeavors

“*Pha pa raeng ngan*” is perhaps the most important Buddhist merit-making activity organized by Thai workers in Singapore. For some reason, this activity has been overlooked as it has never been mentioned in any existing studies on Thai workers in Singapore, even the most comprehensive ones like Porntipa Atipas (2001) and Wong (2000). At the outset, it may be viewed as a simple and familiar fund-raising project initiated by groups of Isan male workers. However, after a series of interviews and participant observation in the organization of the *pha pa*, I realized that this collective effort could be counted as a form of culturally/religiously organized social remittances, through which Thai migrant workers have maintained their connections with ‘home’ while they are absent away on their labor-selling missions abroad. It shows their moral obligation to ‘give back’ to their home, where they always belong. They send an amount of money back home to help their communities build Buddhist temple halls, school buildings, asphalted roads, and other public utility projects. The exact amount of remittance money through *pha pa* fund raising projects is still unknown as no one has ever kept the record, but, as a number of workers and experienced organizers of this annual merit-making activity, told me, it could be as much as millions of Thai Baht per year. One of my informants estimated that there are at least 250 *pha pa* projects (*kong*) per annum. An average project is usually reported to raise around 2,000SGD (1,216USD;

48,000THB).²⁶ It means each year the *pha pa* remittance could pump as much as 500,000SGD (304,068USD; 12,006,345THB) of foreign currency directly to the Thai rural economy.²⁷

The *pha pa* project is organized through personal leadership and social networks not only between a group of migrant workers and their original home villages, but also strong social reciprocal relationships and network organizations among workers in different worksites throughout the Island. Each year there are a large number of *pha pa* fundraising projects among Thai workers. The gathering to collect and remit donated money has taken place every week around the Golden Mile and its nearby meeting spots. The peak of this seasonal activity is seen around January and April. January and February are highlighted by the International New Year and Chinese New Year holidays. These are the times when most workers are on their long holidays with some of them receiving *hang pao* money from their employers. March and April are particularly auspicious times for Buddhist merit making and festivals in Isan, where most temple fairs and village festivals are organized around Songkran Festival (April 13-15) to celebrate the Tai/Thai traditional new year.²⁸

The *pha pa* is a joint-effort between leaders at the village host in Isan and their fellow villagers/workers abroad. In most Thai Buddhist villages, it is an annual event and held as one of grand Buddhist merit making or fundraising projects to mobilize money and resources for specific civic development projects. In this event, money, labor, and other material resources are sought after from virtually every reliable source both inside and outside of their village boundaries. Members of the villages by birth, residential, or other means of social membership, are requested to make a donation in the name of

making merit together for ‘our village’ (*tham bun huam kan/het bun nam kan*). In the past few decades, young migrant workers from the village and their social networks at their workplaces in Bangkok and overseas (i.e., Brunei, Israel, Japan, Middle East, Singapore, Taiwan) are viewed as very significant contributors to the village *pha pa* fundraising activity.²⁹

Not every worker is capable of putting together a *pha pa* project. As cultural and economic capital mobilization endeavors at the community level, it requires leadership and organization. Chai, 38, a veteran worker in Singapore and *pha pa* organizer from Udon Thani, insists that the leader and his committee members are very important. They need to have strong and reliable networks of fellow workers, whose construction sites are located in different places throughout the Island. They need to have accumulated sufficient degrees of trust and charisma (*barami*), which is perceived through one’s past records of contributing or helping other previous *pha pa* projects organized by their fellow workers. A successful leader of a *pha pa* project, widely called the president (*prathan*), usually has a personal reputation as being fair, sportsman-like and a giver and taker. He must also have strong reciprocal relationships with a large number of friends (*pen phu kwang kwang*). In other words, he needs to have excellent social skills of social reciprocity. He also needs to have enough support and cooperation from his fellow committee members in order to carry out different tasks such as, distributing and collecting the *pha pa* envelopes (*song pha pa*), preparing and organizing food and drink for the gathering to ‘open *pha pa* envelopes’ (*poet song pha pa*), and remit the donated money home.³⁰

Every *pha pa* project needs a village host and the proposal begins from there. In most cases, the leaders of the hosting village such as, the village headman, school teacher, local police or member of the Sub district Administration Organization (*ongkan borihan suan tambon—oo bo to*) originally initiated the plan of this annual fundraising activity among their fellow villagers. The outside potential donors including overseas migrant workers are invited or requested to contribute as an extended social network to raise more donations. Most of *pha pa* activities in Singapore belong to this category. Charoen and his fellow workers from Udon Thani were requested by the local police to contribute money to a local road construction project. Nak and his friends were invited to make a donation for a *pha pa* activity in Nakhon Phanom to build a library in the village school. Vira and his friends from the same village and their neighbors organized their *pha pa* to help their village erect a temple preaching hall in Nong Khai.³¹ However, there are also cases in which *pha pa* activity has been proposed by the migrant workers themselves as they are willing to contribute to their home village. They volunteer to gather donations from the Singapore's side to contribute to the ongoing merit making activity at home. The proposal from the migrant workers' side is more frequently seen among those who work inside the country. Most overseas *pha pa* projects, as I observed in Singapore, fit into the category of invited or requested contribution to the ongoing merit making activity in a particular host village.

The *pha pa* proposal has reached its overseas donors in the form of a bunch of *pha pa* envelopes, which is widely known among Thai-Isan workers as *song* or *song pha pa*. Printed on its front surface is the merit making event's details indicating what, where, why, and when the *pha pa* is to be held. It also provides blank spaces for the donor/merit

maker to fill in their name, address, and amount of donated money. Inside the envelope is a letter repeating the aforementioned details as well as list of organizing committee members from both the hosting village and the overseas worker. Man, 45, a veteran worker and frequent *pha pa* donor from Buriram, explains that since most of the listed names are authentic and respected persons, the letter is proof to ensure the donor of the *pha pa*'s auspiciously creditable intention, is not a fraud. The title of a *pha pa* project is written in a way to honor the contribution from workers in Singapore in their joint merit making efforts, for example, "You are cordially invited to host the *Yasothon-Singapore Pha Pa Project* to help with funding the construction of the temple's fence at Ban Nangam, Tambon Sompho, Amphur Thai Charoen, Changwat Yasothon, dated on Thursday March 1st, 2005." Or "You are cordially invited to host the *Singapore-Nakhon Phanom Pha Pa for Education Project* at Ban Dong Khwang Village School, Tambon Saen Phan, Amphur That Phanom, Changwat Nakhon Phanom, dated on Saturday January 8, 2005."

³² These messages are commonly printed on every *pha pa* project's envelope, pamphlet, or advertisement banner. The intention is to provide necessary information and convince the donor of proof of authenticity and originality, as cases of merit-making fraud are frequently reported in the Thai media.

Although it varies from case to case, most *pha pa* projects among Thai workers in Singapore have prepared between 800-2,000 envelopes. The *pha pa* organizer has roughly calculated the return of around 70-80 per cent of the distributed envelopes. While most non-committee and general workers tend to donate around 1-2 SGD (0.6-1.2USD; 48THB) per envelope, the committee members, especially the president and vice president who are members of the hosting village, are expected to contribute up to several

hundred Singapore dollars. Panya, one of a recent presidents of the *pha pa* from Udonthani spent 500SGD (304USD; 12,000THB)³³ with almost half of this amount allocated to organizing expenses such as food, drink, and other allowances. He donated 300SGD (182USD; 7,200THB) to the *pha pa* fund for his village temple.³⁴ It was my observation during the gathering that most *pha pa* envelopes rarely contained more than 10SGD (6USD; 240THB), except those belonging to organizing committee members. The largest proportion was envelopes containing a 2-SGD banknote. Many were sealed with coins. A number of the Thai workers revealed that, since their salary is limited and they need to remit their earning to support their families or pay off their debt bondage, they often feel there are too many *pha pa* envelopes coming to them throughout the year. Although they are willing to help out friends/organizers by making merit with them, they cannot afford to spend a large portion of their precious earnings. This is the major reason why the majority of them usually donate one or two dollars each *pha pa* envelope. Pornchai, 42, a veteran worker from Kalasin, told me that each year he has received between 15-20 *pha pa* envelopes and spent up to 50SGD (30USD; 1,200THB) on this activity. Although making merit is a voluntary activity and depends on the individual's decision, most Buddhist Thais have a strong moral obligation to contribute what they can, especially when they are requested.³⁵

The most important stage of *pha pa* organization is the quasi-ceremonial gathering called *poet song*, literally to open the envelope. It is a time when organizers and friends from different worksites agree to bring together the *pha pa* envelopes, which they had distributed earlier through the connection of their fellow villagers and friends known as *sai* (a key person with a chained social connection). They normally chose to get

together to open the *pha pa* envelopes at their favorite place at the Golden Mile Complex, the HDB flats near Golden Mile, or Kallang Riverside Park on Sunday afternoons or holidays. Key members in the organizing committee play the roles of the *pha pa*'s host (*chao phap*), adopting the same functioning in the genuine *pha pa* and other ceremonies back home in Isan. The hosts have to prepare food, drink, and snacks as if it were a real feast. Reed mattresses are spread on the ground under the tree-sheds in the Park or on the cement floor inside the building as the meeting spot, where around 20-30 *pha pa* donors and their friends come to witness the sorting and collecting of the final donation.

In most circumstances, this quasi-ceremony starts with donors, guests, and hosts having a meal together. Eating, drinking, and enjoying social greetings and fun are the most fundamental aspects of the village festivals in Isan and elsewhere. The hosts prepare a variety of food, but the main dishes are traditional Isan-style cooked food, including glutinous rice, papaya salad (*som tam*), grilled chicken (*kai yai*), and cooked or raw beef/pork in Isan-style ingredients (*lap* or *koi*). Drinks, especially rice whisky and beer, are bought from the store inside the Golden Mile or from the lady vendors mostly from Isan, on the spot. In some cases, the host does not have time to cook as most construction workers rarely have time off from their tight schedule and demanding employers (*thao kae*). They buy cooked food and vegetables from the Golden Mile stores. When everybody is well fed, the president of the *pha pa* activity calls for the attention of those gathered in order to proceed to the actual tearing open of the envelopes and counting the donated money. It is time for all *pha pa* participants to join and witness the counting of monies towards a particular *pha pa* project and learn the total of their overall collective effort. In most of the events I attended, the envelopes contained both Thai and Singapore

currency with the larger contribution being in Singapore dollars. Whilst committee members were busy counting and sorting the money which came in various sizes, shapes, coins and banknotes, the rest of the participants stayed on to give moral support and witness that the donation was handled in a proper and transparent manner.³⁶

An additional step to raise more money for fellow workers and donors attending this quasi-ceremony is called “*to yot*” (literally, to extend or top up the donated money they have already collected from the envelopes). When the collected amount of donation is finalized, the president, who also acted as the master of ceremony, announces before the gathering the exact amount of the donation and asks whether they agree that it is an appropriate amount to be remitted to their folks back home or if anybody wants to make an additional top-up donation. It is another way to call for a donation on spot, where the name of the donor and amount of his donation are publicly acknowledged, usually accompanied with a compliment and cheer from fellow workers. Some cite that they need the final amount of the donation to end with the number 9 (i.e., 799, 899, 999, or 1999SGD), which is considered an auspicious number in the Thai popular belief because it is pronounced with the sound (*kao*) which indicates growth and progress. In some cases, the topping up session encourages more donations from both committee members and fellow worker participants as it usually ends up raising a couple of hundred additional dollars.³⁷

Many worker-donors agree that ‘*to yot*’ is the most interesting and entertaining part of the *pha pa* gathering. It allows people in their social cycle to step up, display their heart of gold, and make their extra donation in the face of their fellow workers. In other words, the *to yot* demonstrates the individual’s ‘face’ and ‘honor’ beyond an ordinary

contribution which allow people in the gathering to recognize and remember his act of special merit making as a social investment accumulation. When the quasi-ceremony finally comes to an end with no further donation, a group of organizing committee members brings the donated money to the remittance service located inside the Golden Mile Complex to send it home to complement the ongoing *pha pa* event there. They usually remit the donation to the bank account of the village headman, the abbot, the school teacher, or a reliable villager, who, in turn, will bring the donation to the local *pha pa* organizing committee. To ensure that the people's donated money is handled properly and used totally for legitimate purposes, a group of key persons in the committee are present during the transaction of money remittance.

The *pha pa* project among Thai male workers in Singapore is an exercise of male networks with an aim to renew and reinforce masculine reciprocal prestige and to strengthen their social and religious commitment to their 'home.' It is an additional activity to their prime role as 'breadwinners' for their immediate families. Their contribution, in a *pha pa* project is mainly organized among men who come from the same or neighboring villages of origin, both confirms and reinforces their moral and social obligation to fulfill some needed financial funds for public development projects at the village level. The *pha pa* project also helps overseas workers, who have been absent from their villages over a sustained period during their international labor migration, to renew their Buddhist faith through merit making as they rarely go to the Buddhist temple while working in Singapore (Wong 2000:105). This activity allows them to maintain their social relationships among male friends working on different worksites in Singapore

besides their normal contacts via mobile phone or social meetings at the Golden Mile Complex.

Labour and Football

Football (soccer) is one of the ultimate outdoor activities for young Isan construction workers played in the late afternoon during hours off from their regular menial jobs and on the weekends. It is not only the most popular sport in Thailand and the Southeast Asian region,³⁸ but it also displays characteristics which suit very well the excessively masculine community of Isan male workers in Singapore. For them, football is their masculine passion and pride. It represents an identity marker of their working class life style and offers a cultural mode of how men from different villages and provinces throughout Isan and Thailand deal with one another. In other words, football is a true masculine game in which Isan male workers play to define and redefine their masculine selves outside their extremely physically demanding jobs and socially suppressed and marginalized social milieu.

Thai Isan workers in Singapore have brought with them not only their menial skills, but also their multi-sport talents and skills, which they have acquired in their village school and daily village sporting events. The workers' sport talents include football, volleyball, *sepak takraw*, and of course Thai kick boxing (*muai Thai*). They regularly play these sports for exercises and to pass time on their construction sites or at the neighborhood sport facilities. On the weekends, some of them manage to practice their football skills with fellow foreign workers from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar or with their Thai counterparts from different companies or worksites. Once or twice a year on the annual celebration of the May Day and some other holidays, they eagerly

participate in most sport events organized by the Office of Thai Labour Affairs, the Royal Thai Embassy. The event, which I will discuss in detail, is the football tournament known among Thai workers in Singapore as the “Thai Labour Cup.” It is the only major sport event among the community of Thai workers and has been organized for the fourth year running.³⁹

The “4th Thai Football Labour Cup,” like any public event, requires considerable effort and input from both the organizing committee under the guidance of the Head of the Office of Labour Affairs (Mr. Somthawee Kopatthanasin) and the staff from FTWA as well as from the participating teams. On the side of the organizing committee, key members sat in a meeting at the FTWA office at the Golden Mile in late October 2004, just one month prior to the event. They did not require much in the way of public relations, since most of team managers/leaders from different construction sites and companies were familiar with one another and most were already looking forward to the football tournament. The organizing committee agreed to have a total of a 14 team-event due to the limitation of time and budget for the rental of the football pitches and referees’ wages. They needed to hire a team of professional referees registered with the Football Association of Singapore (FAS) to supervise the game after a series of verbal complaints from participating teams in the previous competitions. Each team was required to pay 200SGD (120USD; 4,800THB) for the application fee and 100SGD (60USD; 2,400THB) as a refundable deposit to guarantee the team’s participation throughout the tournament. The winners would walk away with 800SGD (486USD; 19,202THB) -prize money plus a trophy, whereas the runners up and the third-place finalists would win 500SGD (304USD; 12,000THB) and 300SGD (182USD; 7,200THB),

respectively. However, the tournament gained overwhelming attention from the community of Thai-workers as the entries had jumped to 21 teams. The organizing committee had to adjust the plan to accommodate the worker-players' enthusiasm. They ended up handling a total of 53 matches and spent more than 12,000SGD (7,300USD; 288,123THB) for the pitch rentals at the Commonwealth, Kan Tong, and Nanyang Junior College and the referees' wages. Playing on every Sunday between 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., the tournament ran from early November 2004 and concluded in late February 2005. It drew hundreds of football fans and supporters from various construction companies throughout Singapore, who participated with loud noises and passionate cheers over an endless series of popular Thai folk music (*lukthung*), Isan/Lao folk music (*molam*), and 'song-for-life' (*pleng phuea chiwit*) music for their teams.⁴⁰

On the side of the participating teams, football demonstrates the workers' social organizational skills and network as much as their sporting talent on the field. As football is a team sport, it is impossible to excel without proper management and leadership on and off the pitch. Yuthana, 38, a veteran football player and trainer from his home village in Nakhon Phanom, told me that a successful football team needs a skillful manager or leader, who can act as a mediator on both team-sponsoring and team-building tasks.⁴¹ Teams participating in the Thai Labour Cup were either self-financed by raising funds among players with the largest amount of contribution coming from the team leader, or financed by the 'sponsors,' who are private stores and companies doing business with Thai workers at the Golden Mile. They included some transnational companies (Siemens and Singha Beer), construction companies (Hiap Seng Engineering, Thai Jurong Engineering, Shimizu Corporation, and Bangkok Forex PTE), VCD/DVD/Cassette store

(Lam Nam Phong), and the remittance service (Phuean Thae GPL). The only exceptional team was the Thai True Way, which was sponsored by a Khon Kaen-based Presbyterian Church.⁴² These sponsors were responsible in paying for application fees, team jerseys, food and drink, sport palms and first-aid kits, while the team leader took care of expenses during pre-tournament training and practice. Only a few lucky teams had gained full sponsorship worth more than 1,000SGD (600USD; 24,000THB), the rest received only a partial sponsorship deal. Thus the team leader himself had to use personal money to run the team right from the beginning.⁴³

Football brought the male workers together and put them on the masculine playground out of their routine of construction work. Som, 24, a young worker from Sakhon Nakhon, insisted that it takes years to build up a good football team. The finalist teams such as Lam Nam Phong, Shimizu, Nong Han, Nong Prachak, and A&D Siemens, have been formed for quite a while and core members of the team (*tua lak*) have played together on a regular basis for at least 2-3 years. They were together as teams even before the Labour Cup was organized in 2001, playing together on weekends and holidays. They played on the vacant grounds in their construction sites or public sport facilities.⁴⁴ Yutthana, the leader of Phuean Thae GPL, revealed that he had to carry out multiple tasks to build up a respected football team, ranging from scouting for talented players, maintaining good relationships with and among team members, keeping up regular training, arranging friendly matches with other teams, and, of course, hunting for considerable financial support. Once a month on his trip to remit his earnings back to his family in Nakhon Phanom at the Golden Mile, he would look around for potential team members among the armies of fellow workers during their free time. His ideal

specifications were men aged between 20-25 years old with good muscular bodies, perfect for football, as well as experienced and talented players from their home villages or schools. Sometimes he joined them in a drink and discussion as to see whether they were the right ‘guys’ for his team before extending an oral invitation to join his club.

Football has established itself a male language or masculine form of communication among workers. Yutthana believes that it is easy for men-who-play-football to connect as they speak the same language and share the same passion. The more important part is how to get the team members to practice together on a regular basis. The team leader has to look for a proper practice field, communicate with players via mobile phones, and arrange agreeable times for the practice without affecting their work in various construction sites. Yutthana and his team had practiced for over a year on the vacant ground near Singapore’s National Stadium in Kallang, where they play five-a-side game, known in Thai as ‘*ko nu*’ (literally, mouse goals). He said playing five-a-side games is the best way to mould the team’s fast-paced teamwork strategies and to simulate the zone defense of the whole standard pitch. When they wanted to play in the ‘big’ standard football field (*sanam yai*), his team members had to contribute like 5SGD (3USD; 120THB) each to pay for the field rental. Alternatively, they can play for free if they manage to win against their opponent team in friendly games, which the losers took care of the pitch fee.⁴⁵

The most illustrated ways in which football brings out the working-class masculine culture among Thai construction workers is perhaps evidenced when the team’s spirit is materialized through the team’s symbols (i.e., name, flag, and uniform) and through the passionate support of their devoted fans. No team entering the 4th Thai

Labour Cup illustrates this point better than the Shimizu, which is the most well-prepared and funded team in the tournament. The Japan-based Shimizu is one of the largest international construction corporations in East and Southeast Asia. Its Singapore branch manages to give full sponsorship to its construction workers' team, led by Somchai, an office worker and veteran football player. Members and supporters of this team traveled in a rented coach and two six-wheel trucks plus sufficient supplies of food and drink (i.e., bottled water, energy drink, glutinous rice, grilled chicken, and some Isan-style cooked food). Alcohol drinks were mostly provided by the foremen or through workers' contributions. Shimizu is the only team that played under their company's proud white flag with blue English letters of their company's name as well as Thailand's tri-colored national flag. Worker-supporters and fans brought with them drums, guitars, and other instruments to entertain themselves and give their team the loudest vocal support during the game. They even roamed the pitch and jumped with uncontrollable joy when their team scored and won games. Some workers even offered the handsome reward of 10 SGD to the scorer for each goal. They traveled, cheered, and supported each other well throughout the tournament, to the extent that Shimizu managed to enter the semi-final round. Unfortunately, they were beaten twice and ended up disappointingly as fourth-placed semi-finalists. They had gained neither a trophy, nor money reward from the organizing committee. However, their Singaporean boss and foreman were generous enough to acknowledge their efforts with financial rewards, since the team helps promote their company's favorable image and play the role model workers with strong discipline and capable bodies.⁴⁶

Football as a metaphor of contemporary Isan village masculinity has both physical and intelligent sides. These dual complementary aspects are essential to play the game of masculine contestation. Every worker player regardless of their amateur football skill and experience is aware of this perception. On its physical side, it requires the players' physical fitness (*mi haeng/mi khwam fit*) through regularized training and proper method. Thongsuk, 37, a veteran player for A&D Siemens, the losing finalist team, commented that his players lacked match fitness (*on som/heang bo tueng*). Because they had worked so hard for their company in the past weeks, they had no time to practice football. Working out on construction sites does not help one to keep or maintain enough fitness to run and fight for the ball over 90 minutes. To make matters worse, on the day of the game, many players drank whisky or beer. Some were even mildly drunk on entering the game. On the intelligent side, a good football player must complement his physical fitness with his wit and understanding of how the game is played. Most worker players felt that they lost 'face' and 'male ego' when the ball was robbed/stolen from their possession by an opponent. They felt it was also demeaning when an opponent dribbled the ball passed them, through miscalculated steps or through a hole between their legs, a tricky move known among players as 'a through ball under one's ass' (*luk lot dak*). As a masculine and contested sport, football players had to play with heart, concentration, and determination to win. Yutthana once stressed to me that "if we do not play to win, why bother to enter the competition. We want to win for the reputation of our team."⁴⁷

The 4th edition of the Thai Labour Cup ended with one of the most competitive and exciting finals between the Phuean Tae GPL and A&D Siemens on February 27,

2005. In the presence of hing-ranking officials and guests of honor from the Royal Thai Embassy and the Office of Thai Labour Affairs, Yutthana's team (GPL) won the championship after the wild penalty shootout. The teams finished with a 1-1 draw in the regulation time, but they needed the 10th player from the GPL to slam home the winner after a series of heart-breaking spot kicks and saves. At the end of the day, Yutthana and his captain led the team members, mostly composed of young men from his local and neighboring villages in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, to collect their winning trophy and individual certificates from the officials. Posing before the camera, they were truly proud worker players and winners enjoying one of their most memorable moments long yearned for as Thai-Isan male migrant workers in Singapore.

Hunting and Gathering away from Home

The proposed model of 'village transnationalism' among Thai-Isan workers in Singapore is far from completion without taking a close look at trips to go fishing and gathering wild food in parts of Singapore's abandoned farming areas and forests. This village-based pastime activity, adopted by groups of workers, resembles what they were used to making a living in their home villages. On the last day of the Chinese New Year in late February 2005, Prasong, 22, my informant from Sakhon Nakhon, invited me to join what he called a 'picnic' trip to some forested areas in Choa Chu Kang. "I will take you out to go 'having a meal in the forest' (*pai kin khao pa*). My roommates are already there. They have been out fishing and gathering wild vegetables since last night," he informed me in our telephone conversation.⁴⁸ I gratefully accepted his invitation and off we went to join the group of workers/fishermen/wild food gathers around noon. We got off the main North/South MRT Line at Choa Chu Kang station, walked through rows of

HDB flats, and crossed the highway deep into the forested areas near a military barrack. A number of workers I met at the Kallang Riverside Park also told me their proud stories of how they went fishing, collected bamboo shoots, wild vegetation, roots, honey, and tropical fruits, like durian, rambutan, and jackfruit from the reserved forests or abandoned fruit orchards in areas like Woodlands, Boon Lay and elsewhere near their construction sites away from Singapore's populated areas.⁴⁹

Khondker (2003:322), speaking of the communities of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore, points out that "he [the migrant worker] is a hunter and gather in a global landscape of capitalism." At least a large number of Thai-Isan workers have demonstrated that the hunter and gather is not a mere metaphor. I had learned the stories of how Thai-Isan workers in Singapore and elsewhere are keen on hunting and gathering game and wild vegetation from media accounts. The hunting and gathering culture among Thai-Isan workers is modeled upon their village life back home in Isan, where most workers were once forest-dwellers and farmers cultivating their land and natural habitations. This forms an important part of traditional self-sufficient economy and culture, known among rural villagers and cultivators as '*ha yu ha kin*.' Activities such as fishing or hunting games are among culturally-acquired and proudest masculine knowledge and skill among men from Isan villages. When they go abroad as migrant workers i.e., to Israel, the Middle East, and Taiwan, they have frequently been reported in the media as having violated the host countries' law and custom with their hunting and gathering activities.

The cultural meaning of hunting and gathering is transported across borders from Thailand's Northeastern countryside to Singapore. Migrant workers who are involved in

this activity in Singapore largely consider it as a combination of going around for fun in the forest (*pai thiaw pa*), going picnicking or having meal in the forest (*pai kin khao pa*) and hunting or gathering wild food in their free time. As most of them work 7 days per week and only have Sunday afternoon off, they cannot solely rely on wild food for their subsistence as migrant workers. Chatri, 27, a 6-year construction worker from Nakhon Phanom, listed the trips to go gather wild food in the forest as one of his leisure activities. Wrote Chatri, “besides sports like football and *sepak takraw*, my friends and I go fishing and gathering fruits in the forests as our pastime.”⁵⁰

As a pastime activity for workers, ‘going around to having fun in the forest’ has provided an escape as well as nostalgic sanctuary from their restricted and menially demanded everyday life. On trips to the forest, as I observed, the workers feel totally at home away from the regulations of the workplace and the disciplinary gazes of Singapore society. The forest as opposite to their construction site and over-crowded dormitory for foreign workers is their playground as well as a temporary venue of self-expression. The forest has released them from their everyday life constrictions and tensions. They can go swimming or take a bath in the abandoned fish ponds or open canals, while collecting fish from the nets. They share jokes and other stories from their different worksites. They hum or sing out loud their favorite songs. They can cook a quick lunch under the tree sheds with utensils and ingredients they brought with them, and take a precious day-time nap after the meal. Sometimes on long holidays they even invite their Thai ‘girlfriends’ (*fan* or *phu sao*), who travel to Singapore for a short social visit to join them on their trips to the forest.

Food gathering plays a little role as a surviving strategy for migrant workers, who have to sustain their life on the margins of Singapore's economy. They cannot entirely rely on their wild food; nonetheless, it is the food item they really enjoy. When they are successful in their fishing or wild food gathering efforts, they often bring the food back to the construction sites or dormitories to save on the cost of food. Sompong, 23, wrote in his diary that "as we are unskilled construction workers, earning only 23SGD (14USD; 552THB) per day and having to pay 200-300SGD (121-182USD; 4,800-7,200THB) per month for food, our trips to the forest gives us not only fun, but also our favorite wild food, like bamboo shoot, edible leaves, fruits, and fishes. We can save our hard-earned salary, too."⁵¹

Concluding Remarks

Together with my stories on the Golden Mile Complex, the *pha pa* Buddhist merit-making endeavors, and the 4th Thai Labour Football Cup, and the narratives on the Thai-Isan workers' trip to gather wild food in the forest, provide detailed examples of how transnationalism has been experienced by contract, male migrant workers from the Northeast Thailand. Modeled and conceptualized these men's lived experiences away from home as 'village transnationalism,' I argue that they offer themselves as materiality to rethink and contribute to what Levitt and Nyberg-Sorensen (2004) call "the transnational turn in the migration studies." They uncover what Yeoh (2003:3; see also Smith 2001) insists that "...transnational identities, while fluid and flexible, are at the same time grounded in particular places at particular times." Although they are "particularly vulnerable to exploitation" (Allen 2003:1), they are salient actors as they

“bring a set of social and cultural tools that aid their adjustments to their new lives... They make sense of their experiences using the interpretive frames they bring with them...” (Levitt 1998:930)

The practice of ‘transnationalism from below’ as indicated in the case studies of male contract workers from Isan in Singapore shows that village transnationalism is one of the major forms of transnational or transborder migration and human mobility in the Southeast Asian context (see Ananta and Arifin 2004). As marked in the prefix of ‘village,’ this form of border crossing identities could be shared by displaced male and female migrants with limited education from the agricultural background in the countryside, who primarily take their opportunities to invest, and thus risk, their future to cross international borders to seek better income and life chances. It could be extended to include similar transnational workers and border-crossers, such as domestic worker, factory worker, farm laborers, fishing industry worker, prostitutes, illegal unskilled worker, transborder tradeswomen on a short-term social visit pass, etc. The work and life of these men and women away from their countries of origin (i.e., Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand or Vietnam) in the countries of destination (i.e., Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, or Thailand) could be relatively understood within the scope of the village transnationalism model.

Thai-Isan workers as key actors in the village transnationalism model are compelled to what Levitt (2001) constructs as ‘transnational villagers.’ As a model of transborder identities, village transnationalism deals primarily with how ordinary people carry out their social, political, and economic lives across borders. They are ‘transnational subjects,’ who “...are historically situated and culturally beings, as bearers

of gender, ethnicity, class, race, nationality, and at the same time agents constantly negotiating these self-identities *vis-à-vis* others in transnational spaces” (Yeoh 2003:2-3). However, due to different political and cultural contexts in Southeast Asia, transnational villagers in Asia are almost completely shut out of the political sphere in the host country. They are subject to the government control and effectively manipulated by legal and political means. In other words, citizenship, membership, or civic engagement on whatever basis with intentions to integrate contract migrant workers into the society and economy of the host countries has never happened in Southeast Asia. It confirms Smith (2001:3)’s thesis that “transnationalist discourse insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as these are often transgressed by transnational communication circuits and social practices.”

‘Village transnationalism’ is specifically embedded in the cultural practices of gender. It means different things to different people. It mirrors the gender identities and cultures of the dominant number of the migrant population in question. In the case of Thai-Isan workers in Singapore, the practices of village transnationalism are predominantly male-oriented. It is about men of working age from Isan who travel to Singapore and how they live, work, and survive by relying on what they have had ‘in them’ and ‘with them’ after being displaced away from home over a sustained period of time. In this respect, village transnationalism of Thai-Isan male workers in Singapore (and elsewhere i.e., Brunei, Israel, Taiwan) are the cultures of village men at work and at play in a foreign setting. Going out, having fun with girls, drinking, gambling, playing football, organizing *pha pa* merit-making projects, or going fishing and gather wild food in the forest perhaps well demonstrates this feature.

In addition, ‘village transnationalism’ is the transnational and transborder acts of transgression predicated on the actors/villagers’ limited cultural and symbolic capitals, which they possess and have been capable of making use of in the foreign country’s contexts. Cultural and symbolic capitals for migrant workers function as ‘interpretive frames’ to make sense of their back breaking realities and to interact to varying degrees with the host society. They further provide transborder identity markers based on why and “...how things were done at home” (Levitt 1998:930). Thai-Isan workers have demonstrated that they may have limited skills to become successful workers in the modern/postmodern society like Singapore. They have low education, limited capital investment, and little knowledge concerning modern technologies and the business world. However, they have their menial labor as their sole commodity in the unskilled international labor market. They also have knowledge and skill as rural villagers or cultivators as their additional cultural and symbolic capitals. Social networks and activities described in the previous sections demonstrate how they have learned to survive in Singapore with that knowledge and skill.

Finally, village transnationalism implies a complex self-reflexive sense of ‘displaced otherness.’ Transnational villagers, as shown in the case of Thai-Isan male construction workers, have by and large become ‘out-classed others’ and have been economically and socially confined into their worksites, dormitories for foreign workers, and some noted ‘ethnocultural enclaves’ in Singapore (i.e., the Golden Mile Complex for Thai workers; Lucky Plaza on the Orchard Road for domestic workers from the Philippines; Little India for workers from South Asia). They have never been culturally or socially integrated or properly incorporated as members of the host’s society. They

have always been given the tag of ‘guest’ workers. Being constricted, confined, and segregated by Singapore authorities and their employers are among common features in the social life of Thai-Isan migrant workers. Kai, 32, a veteran factory worker from Khon Kaen, once commented to me that Thai male workers’ lives in Singapore are centered only on a few items: “carrying out their daily job, then visiting the Golden Mile, getting drunk, womanizing, and gambling when they are free.”⁵²

The social life of Thai-Isan workers as true socially excluded workmen in Singapore is further demonstrated in this life story. Wisit, 45, a veteran worker from Udon Thani, had endured hardship working as a plumber fixing school and housing toilets for more than two years. Said Wisit, “I carried out the dirtiest job in the world. Sometimes, shit, urine, and human waste spilled all over my body from head to toe. I even swallowed it a number of times. My Singaporean boss just gave me an order and left. I had to carry out the job on my own. Sometimes, I had lunches without washing or cleaning at all.”⁵³ This workman of Singapore’s capitalist transnationalization has moved away from his ‘dirtiest job in the world’ to become an electrician with a new company. He has endured and survived the harsh realities away from home for almost a decade now.

Notes

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places, I follow the guideline of transcription sanctioned by the Royal Institute (Ratchabanditthayasathan) (see <http://www.royin.go.th-translate01.html>) to transliterate terms in Central and Northeastern Thai (Isan) dialects.

²The author is currently postdoctoral research fellow in Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, the Shaw Foundation Building AS7, Level 4, 5 Arts Link, Singapore 117570. Email: aripk@nus.edu.sg. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to these following institutions and individuals for their generous assistance and contribution: the Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore, the Office of Thai Labour Affairs, the Friends of Thai Workers Association, H.E. Ambassador Dr. Thakur Phanit, H.E. Ambassador Chalernpol Thanchitt, Mr. Somthawee Kopatthanasilp, Ms. Patana Bhandhufalck, Dr. Mika Toyota, Dr. Nichola Piper, Dr. Eric Thompson, Ms. Zhang Juan, and a large number of anonymous Thai-Isan construction workers and vendors who welcomed me to their life away from home. Ms. Thelma Fadgyas renders me her editorial skill to improve my English in the first draft. View or comment expressed in this article is exclusively and totally mine. It does not necessarily reflect policies or academic standpoints adopted by Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, institutions, or individuals mentioned in this paper.

³Guarnizo and Smith (1998:6) maintain that the focal focus of '*Transnationalism from Below*' is to "...discern how transnationalism [as a multifaceted, multi-local process] affects power relations, cultural constructions, economic interactions, and more generally, social organization at the level of the locality."

⁴Interview, September 12, 2004.

⁵In 1995, the typical fee charged by private agencies to locate a construction job in Singapore was 1,800 USD per head (Jones and Tieng Pardthaisong 1999:41, Table 5). Wong (2000:73) mentions the market rate of 12,500 USD (50,000 THB) per head for the recruitment fee in 1995. While the rate for renewed work permit holder has been roughly stable in the past 10 years, each first-time worker has to pay up to 2,500 USD in 2004 (Interview. December 19, 2004).

⁶Tony, the owner and operator of major remittance service outlets at the Golden Mile Complex, estimates that an average Thai migrant worker sends money home twice or thrice a month. Each transaction worths 312 USD (500 SGD; 12,000 THB) (Interview. May 8, 2005). However, data from my interviews show that most Thai workers remit their earnings back to their families only once a month with an average of 150 USD. Even though they are paid weekly (between 156-187 USD or 250-300 SGD), they prefer to save for and send it as a larger sum of money. Their folks at home consider it a kind of prestige to have earned a monthly remittance as their family regular income similar to the government officials and other office workers (Interview. May 9, 2005).

⁷Thai workers have a reputation as diligent, hard-working, and obedient workmen in their normal selves, but they can become real-trouble workers when they get drunk.⁷ Most Singaporean employers share this stereo-typicalized perception on the quality of Thai-Isan workers. Darren, for example, is quoted as saying that "when they are sober, they are the best workers, But when they get drunk, they can be real trouble makers" (cited in Supara Janchitfah 2002).

⁸See "3 Thai Workers Found Dead at Worksite." *The Strait Times Interactive*. February 13, 2005. Electronic document, <http://www.straittimes.asia1.com/sub/storyprintfriendly/0,5578,300580-1108331940,0>, accessed February 14, 2005. Worksite accident is the major concern by Singapore Ministry of Manpower. In the first half of 2004, '46 workers have died in construction sites and factories - up by 17 during the same period last year' ("Accidents at Worksites and Factories Claim 46 Lives in First Half of 2004." *Channel NewsAsia*. July 22, 2004. Electronic document, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/97073/1/.html>, accessed May 3).

⁹My one-year fieldwork among Thai-Isan migrant workers in Singapore began in early 2004, when I came to serve my postdoctoral fellowship terms at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. One of the advantages of working and living in Singapore for a sociocultural anthropologist is a fairly accessible opportunity to observe the multinational, dynamic, and diverse workforce in this Island's setting. I am always amazed by the fact that Singapore's impressive economic growth and overall progress has long been engined largely by foreign skilled and unskilled workers.⁹ Since I am a native ethnographer from Isan and have been intensively carrying out research in the region for over a decade, I was naturally attracted by the presence of a large number of Thai-Isan migrant workers, with whom I share common geo-cultural origin and ethnic identity.

¹⁰In her book, *The Transnational Villagers*, Levitt (2001) studies the Dominicans living in Boston while maintaining close connection with family and politics in the Dominican Republic. She explores how

ordinary people can continue to keep their feet in two worlds and create communities that span borders. While I share the similar 'village' metaphor with her original work, our 'villages' are situated in totally different worlds. My focus is on the ethnic Thai-Lao and Buddhist villagers from Northeastern Thailand who have become contract, migrant workers in Singapore. As the Thai-Isan workers as transnational villagers will never be allowed to settle in Singapore, my study is more concerned with how are resources, knowledge, and skill, which they had acquired and brought with them from the Thai countryside, turned into their limited cultural and symbolic capitals and transborder identities during their temporary missions abroad.

¹¹Jones and Tieng Pardthaisong (1999:32-46) discuss the dominant roles of commercial agencies acting as intermediaries between workers and foreign employers as well as the overall recruitment and job placement processes practiced in Thailand in mid 1990s.

¹²Article 5 (2) of Singapore's Employment of Foreign Workers Act (Chapter 91A) states that "No foreign worker shall be in the employment of an employer without a valid work permit."

¹³See <http://www.amesty.it/news/1996/33600296.htm>.

¹⁴Interview with a Thai Labor Councilor, January 14, 2005.

¹⁵For years, foreign workers of different national origins have maintained their own popular spots for social gathering during their off-duty days in Singapore. The Indian and Bangladesh have their favorite spot in Little India, the Filipina domestic workers have occupied the Lucky Plaza and a nearby park on the Orchard Road, the Indonesians visit City Plaza near Kan Tong, and the Thai have gathered at the Golden Mile Complex on the Beach Road. To me these meeting spots seem to be products of somewhat designed and controlled ethnocultural sanctuaries or enclaved zones, where Singapore's ironed legal, economic, and cultural regulations have insistently denied or ruled out the possibility to integrate or assimilate foreign workers into its geopolitical and cultural bodies. Unskilled contract workers of foreign origins have been dealt with by "an economically efficient manner" (Then cited in Wong 2000:64). In other words, they are by all means kept and guarded against as outcast others, whose labors on the 3D jobs are valued insofar as they help fuel their economic growth and maintain their social well-being with high quality of life.

¹⁶To describe the Golden Mile in a rather negative manner is a way to stigmatize the place. To be fair, it is far from being a lawless mall. Apart from frequent inspections by the local police, the Golden Mile has established its own regulations. During its peak hours usually on Sunday afternoon, the Golden Mile management has repeatedly played the following recorded message both in Thai and English through its public address system. "Welcome all our customers and visitors to the Golden Mile. Please listen to an announcement for your cooperation. First, do not smoke in the Golden Mile Complex because it is an air-conditioned area. In case of an offense, a fine of 1,000 SGD will be imposed. Second, do not sit on or litter the floor. Please drop the rubbish in the bin. Third, do not urinate on the stairs, at the building's corners, or in the parking lots. Please use the public toilet. Fourth, do not disturb or bother other people. Do not quarrel or put up a fight in the Golden Mile area. And do not drink too much as you will lose control of yourself. With best wishes from the Golden Mile management. Thank you" (Fieldnote. January 15, 2005). Here I translate and quote the Thai-language version of this public announcement. It provides specific and extensive message aiming at keeping order and disciplining the crowd of Thai workers/customers, who have apparently been indifferent to the message. Its English version is rather brief and less persuasive. It does not incur a sense of serious warning or threat as it says "Do not smoke. Do not litter. Thank you and happy shopping at the Golden Mile" (Fieldnote. January 15, 2005). As the workers do not speak English, the English-language address is intended to English-speaking Singaporean and other international customers and visitors, who are more cooperative and well-behaved. Altogether these messages suggest that Thai workers are trouble-making customers, nonetheless, for some business reasons, their wild and unsophisticated behavior can be tolerated. They reflect very well the Singapore government and overall society's attitude toward Thai and other foreign workers.

¹⁷Interview with Dr. Thakur Phanit, Thailand's Ambassador to Singapore, the Royal Thai Embassy, September 4, 2004.

¹⁸HDB stands for the Housing and Development Board, a Singapore's government agency which is in-charge of planning and running the country's residential flats and housing units.

¹⁹Thai Workers' Diary #07, January 21, 2005.

²⁰Thai Workers' Diary #07, January 21, 2005.

²¹Thai Workers' Diary #01, January 28, 2005.

²²Thai Workers' Diary #12, January 28, 2005.

²³Interview, July 25, 2004. In his diary, Naruchai, 32, wrote that “I am glad that we have the center for my fellow workers from Thailand at the Golden Mile. It is the place for us, no matter how far is it located; I will try my best to be there. Most of my friends meet there every week. If we renamed it as “the Thai Town,” it would be cool!” (Thai Workers’ Diary, January 16, 2005).

²⁴Son, 24, a young worker from Sakhon Nakhon told me a story when he was arrested by the police when he and his friends walked in a neighborhood on their way back to the foreign workers’ dormitory because one of the residents suspected them and called the police. They were fortunate since they had their work permits with them (Interview, January 16, 2004). Many workers I interviewed during their visit to the Kallang Riverside Park complained that some residents threw water bottles or yelled at them when they worked in the residential housing, even though they had the permission and followed proper procedure (Interview, November 21, 2004). Prasit, 33, and Thosaporn, 41, both veteran migrant workers who used to work in Taiwan and Brunei before coming to Singapore, commented that Singaporeans are generally not generous and helpful (*mai mi nam chai*). They come from different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. They are rather individualistic. The job placement agents always take advantages of the foreign workers. Taiwanese employers are much more generous and pay respect to their foreign employees (Interview, February 8, 2004).

²⁵Dr. Eric Thompson (Department of Sociology, NUS) (personal communication, January 2005) brought to my attention that the mobile phone, which is extremely popular among male and female foreign workers in Singapore, is used to offset their limited physical mobility as they are usually confined to their construction sites, employers’ homes, and foreign workers’ dormitories in their everyday life. Thanks to its affordable price, the mobile phone allows foreign workers to maintain their social networks both in Singapore and at their home countries. Culturally and physically handicapped as they do not speak English (except workers from countries like the Philippines and India) and live and work away from their friends, lovers, families, or relatives, the mobile phone is not only a wireless technology-cum-fashion, but also has multiple psycho-social, economic, and cultural functions. More importantly, it empowers the migrant workers to speak or communicate in their own language at times when they could feel a sense of power and control over their life despite a short temporary moment and, of course, at some expenses.

²⁶In 2004, one Singapore Dollar is approximately equivalent to 24 Thai Baht; one US Dollar 39 Thai Baht.

²⁷Fieldnote, January 16, 2005. I use the XE.com Currency Convert available at <http://www.xe.com>. As of February 2005, one Singapore Dollar is equivalent to 0.6 US Dollar and 24 Thailand Baht.

²⁸Interview, March 6, 2005.

²⁹Interview, March 6, 2005.

³⁰Interview, February 20, 2005.

³¹Fieldnote, February 13, 2005.

³²Field Document, January and March, 2005.

³³Most ordinary Thai-Isan construction workers earn 23 SGD per day. They work 6 days a week. Plus their over-time earning (ranging between 3-5 SGD per hour), most of them earn less than 700 SGD per month. Some veteran and skilled workers (i.e., crane operator, electrician, carpenter, etc) usually earn up to 1,000 SGD per month. Therefore, if one makes a donation of 500 SGD, he is considered very generous. It means he donates more than 50 per cent of his monthly earning to the *pha pa* merit making. He thus could not remit his money to his family that month.

³⁴Interview, February 20, 2005.

³⁵Interview, March 6, 2005.

³⁶Fieldnote, February 9, 2005.

³⁷Fieldnote, February 9 and March 6, 2005.

³⁸Thailand is currently the King of Southeast Asian football despite some reported poor management, corruption, and power struggles in running the Football Association of Thailand (FAT). Thailand has won six consecutive gold medals of the bi-annual Southeast Asian Games since 1993. Its national team also won 3 out of 5 Tiger Cups, which is billed as the official Southeast Asian championship, in 1996, 2000, and 2002. Some leading Thai football players have come to play professional football in Singapore’s professional football league in 1990s and the present. It should be noted that football, due to its overwhelming popularity at the grass-root level, has become a major rival to Thai and international-style boxing as a political extravaganza for politicians, military big men, and bureaucrats to gain or appeal for the popular support. The government under the leadership of Thaksin Shinnawatra has consistently exploited the country’s passion to this sport to achieve their political gains in the past four years with

heavily-publicized projects like a failed proposal to buy partial shares in some famous English Premier League Football Clubs, the street soccer tournaments, or even the VIP League among politicians and officials working in different ministries and departments.

³⁹The original idea to organize an official competitive football tournament among workers in Singapore should reflect the populist politics under the Thaksin Shinawatra's regime. In the name of health and well-being promotion, popular team sports such as football and mass-participated aerobic dance have been organized nationwide. The Ministry of Labour Affairs has initiated the popular "Labour Cup" among workers from different factories and corporations in Bangkok and its suburbs since 2001.

⁴⁰ Fieldnote, November 27, 2004. These three genres of music have established themselves as identity markers of Thai-Isan and overall Thai rural and urban working class people. Their popularity among Thai workers in Singapore is noticeable as they are sung and played during their pastimes in their construction sites or dormitory. Cassettes, VCD, and DVD of these music genres are available at numerous stores at the Golden Mile. The roles of music in making workers' transborder identities are worth a deeper exploration.

⁴¹Interview, November 28, 2004.

⁴²There are a number of Christianity Churches working on Thai migrant workers in Singapore. Besides the Thai True Way, the Thai Chen-Li Church, based in Bangkok, has offered its building to host the Non-Formal Education classes, which have enrolled a number of worker-students for years. With some supports from some local churches in Singapore, these Churches aim to convert the workers. However, some workers I interviewed told me that only a small group of workers join these Churches for a pure religious reason. "As I am a Buddhist, it is hard to force myself to accept God. I do not want to lie to them, so I have to distance myself from them." Others felt that they do not like the ways the preachers imposed on them something alien to their previous religious faith and belief (Interview, June 12, 2004).

⁴³Fieldnote, December 19, 2004.

⁴⁴Interview, December 19, 2004.

⁴⁵Interview, December 19, 2004.

⁴⁶ Fieldnote, November 28, 2004; February 27, 2005.

⁴⁷Interview, February 27, 2005

⁴⁸The concept of *kin khao pa* is a traditional Thai-Isan village's way of going trekking, hunting for games, wild food gathering, and picnicking in the forest besides having meals at the cottages on the farming sites. It is part of a trip to go hunting and gathering food away from home villages and beyond as Khamphun Bunthawi (1976) demonstrated in his classical novel, *Luk Isan* (the Child of the Northeast).

⁴⁹Fieldnote, September 19, 2004.

⁵⁰Thai Workers Diary #4, January 16, 2005.

⁵¹Thai Workers Diary #16, February 2, 2005.

⁵²Interview, September 12, 2004.

⁵³Interview, March 13, 2005.

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