

Research Notes Life on Wheels:
Female Tai Transnational Migrant
Worker from Northern Shan State
in the City of Chiang Mai
บันทึกภาคสนาม
ชีวิตติดล้อ: แรงงานหญิงไตข้ามชาติ
จากรัฐฉานในเมืองเชียงใหม่

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¹ My gratitude goes to Sipo, and to all members of her extended family in her natal village. I acknowledge a value help from Professor Judy Pine from Western Washington University, Bellingham,, WA for lending her language as well as academic editing in short notice. The two reviewer anonymous comments are useful to improve the paper. My village stay in 2015 was possible because, I was allowed to have one 30-day round-trip tickets under kind consideration by Vice-Dean (as of 2015) and Dean (as of 2020) Professor, Dr.Thepin Phatcharanur of Faculty of Social Sciences, CMU, who was Director of her research training project, under TGLIP, got me to help with on – site field-work supervision in Mandalay for two days and allowed me to have 30-day round-trip tickets so that I was able to have my village visit for 30-days in the Northern Shan State. I thank RCSD’s assignment for the Mandalay that allows me to have one set of round-trip tickets extended beyond assignment date in 2017 so that I was able to return to the Northern Shan State village of Sipo’s birth.

Abstract

These “research notes” present narrative accounts of a female Northern Shan State migrant worker who came alone to Chiang Mai when she was only 16 years of age due to the divorce of her late father who took up with a minor wife/mia-noi. He often took the family supply of rice, toilette items for his minor wife/mia-noi. He was forced to face the authorities and elders of both sides of the family to be divorced from his wife who was granted to raise Sipo, the oldest daughter, her younger sister, and her youngest brother were left with their divorced mother without a paddy field and water buffaloes. Sipo had to come as an illegal transnational migrant worker in the city of Chiang Mai at the age of 16. After spending around 27 years (as of 2020) working and raising her family of three with her earnings, Sipo was blessed by her late father’s the title as “official head of her Tai household” before his passing.² ‘Life history’ and ‘life course’ interviews and field participation and observation took place during about 30 days in the 2015 hot season and 5 days in the 2017 hot season.

Key Words: Research Notes, Female Transnational Migrant Worker, Northern Shan State, Life History, Life Course, Participant-observation

² Sipo’s achievements include two important rituals of local practices that are part of Poi Sang Long/young boys’ ordination ritual in which Tai women usually cut off their spool of long hair to be offered to Lord Buddha during the village annual Poi Sang Long ritual. The other significant ritual is known as “rocking cradle/Kai Ou, funeral ritual for Meun Chao/abbot of a monastery during funeral ritual prior to cremation. These two rituals offer cultural symbolic to honor women that are observed by Tai people, (Due to space limitation, these two ritual ‘research notes’ are not included in this text.)

บทคัดย่อ

“บันทึกสนาม” เรื่องนี้นำเสนอเรื่องเล่าเส้นชีวิตของสี่ป้อ ปัจจุบันอายุ 43 ปี แม่หญิงโตจากหมู่บ้านในรัฐฉานตอนเหนือผู้ได้เดินทางเข้ามาในเชียงใหม่ในฐานะแรงงานข้ามชาติตั้งแต่อายุเพียง 16 ปี (ปัจจุบันอายุ 43 ปี) ในฐานะผู้รับผิดชอบหาเงินเพื่อเลี้ยงดูครอบครัวคือ แม่ผู้หย่าร้างจากพ่อ น้องสาวอายุ 14 ปี และน้องชายอายุ 12 ปี หลังจากใช้เวลาราว 27 ปี ทำงานและเลี้ยงครอบครัว พ่อได้มอบให้เธอเป็นหัวหน้าครอบครัวก่อนที่จะเสียชีวิต การสัมภาษณ์ประวัติชีวิตและเส้นชีวิต และการสังเกตการณ์แบบมีส่วนร่วมใช้เวลาประมาณ 1 เดือนในช่วงฤดูร้อนปี พ.ศ. 2558 และอีก 5 วันในฤดูร้อนปี พ.ศ. 2560

คำสำคัญ: บันทึกภาคสนาม, แรงงานหญิงข้ามชาติ, รัฐฉานตอนเหนือ, ประวัติชีวิต, เส้นชีวิต, การสังเกตการณ์แบบมีส่วนร่วม



(Retrieved from <https://forums.chiangraifocus.com/?topic=282335.0#gsc.tab=0>)

Life on Wheels: Female Transnational Migrant Worker from Northern Shan State in the City of Chiang Mai (Part One)

Sipo's father's statement to her brother made before his death in 2017 and attested to as accurate:

“From now on, you must listen to your oldest sister, Sipo who has been feeding and caring for you (liang do), your wife and two daughters³, your other older sister before her marriage and living with your mother, and your mother for years since I left the family. Sipo went to Thailand at the age of 16 to earn enough money for all of you until now because I took water buffaloes and paddy fields to live with my new wife after the divorce. Sipo always has given her earnings to your mother so that she has enough money to feed all of you until now. Sipo is 38 years old (as of 2015) with no family of her own. She comes home from her Chiang Mai work to be with your mother and your family for about 30 days every year. I still remember

³ At the time of the statement, Sipo's brother had two daughters. His son was born in 2020.

when Sipo came back home for 30 days during one dry season with enough money to replace the original grass roof with a corrugated iron roof over that bamboo walling with the dirt floor house of my marriage to your mother so that there was no more leaking roof during the rainy season. That was years ago, right? Now, there are over 600,000 Baht modern one story-home for you and your growing family and your mother, and that was paid from Sipo's Thailand earnings.

When you got hooked on drinking, again, Sipo took you to the hospital to get your alcoholism cured. Sipo cut off your request for an agriculture annual budget after learning from your mother and your wife that you again would waste her hard-earned money on your gambling bin. For over 20 years, Sipo has been the sole provider for the family. Sipo has been there for all of you all for these years. Sipo has done what I, your father did not do for you and all in the family. You must tell everyone in the family that all of you must treat Sipo as head of the household as I was not. Sipo has been doing my duty and responsibility after I left the family. Sipo, your oldest sister and the firstborn is entitled to officially the role of the family's head. Do not ask me but do ask Sipo what you should do in your life, my son.”

In 2003, I returned to my family home in Chiang Mai after I left when I was 25 years old. My late oldest sister and her family allowed me to live with them during the period that my older brother got my new house built in the next door empty lot. That was the first time I met Sipo who came to clean my family house. I was impressed with a straight talker and hardworking person like Sipo was. I took note of her use of black iPhone ear-buds talking very often on her cell phone while she was cleaning the house. I asked her whether her cell phone bill did not bankrupt her! She with a broad smile said that there so many promotion cell phone cards available which offered very low cost. She took advantage of that kind of deal. I said that I did not know about that because I did not use a cell phone. Sipo laughed. That ice-

breaking helped me to ask her about her Northern Shan State family.

Sipo got to share with me her Tai Nua family background. I was impressed with her 'life history' and 'life course' after learning more about her childhood and that of her parents who were born in the Tai Tai Kong territory. Her paternal grandparents fled the revolutionary that was led by Chairman Mao. Her mother was born and raised in her maternal grandparents' village. Only her younger brother and his family fled and came to live in a new village in Northern Shan State. Her mother came to visit them with some relatives one time. She met Sipo's a single father but 10 years younger. Their courtship took place. Their elders of both families were informed and approved. They got married and settled in the present village which is also Sipo's natal village that I did my village visit in the 2015 and 2017 hot seasons. These 'research notes' come from an abridged version of my field-notes.

Sipo told me that she was a Tai Nua. Her parents were born in their two separate natal villages which were in the Tai Kong territory. Only her paternal grandparents and their grown-up children came to settle in the present village in the Northern Shan State territory when there was a revolution in China that was led by Chairman Mao. As for her mother, she was born and grew up in her parent's Tai Kong village. One or two older brothers and their families migrated to this present area. She came to visit them and met Sipo's father who was 10 years younger than her. He was a young long-distance cattle trader. There was a short courtship. They got approval from both sides of their family's elders and got married. They settled in the present village. He came to his new family with some water buffaloes and lowland paddy fields. They were able to clear one empty slopped plot with some bamboo grove to build their bamboo split and woven walling, dirt floor, and grass-thatched roof small house for themselves. Later on, all three children, Sipo and her younger sister and brother had been raised in that house of this village until her mother divorced her father because of his taking up with the second woman, his Mia Noi/minor wife.

Sipo's father was vicious when he drank. He beat up her mother. Her younger sister got hurt in between too because she was almost glued to her mother. Sipo was not home and was spared from the abuse. However, Sipo recalled the good old days when her father returned from his successful long-distance cattle trade to Thakhielek, he bought Thai made dresses and shoes for her and her younger sister. Alcohol changed him and moreover his new married minor wife with one daughter took over his kind father she knew. He changed. That is the sole and main reason for Sipo to leave home at the age of 16 heading for Chiang Mai to earn enough money for her entire family for the last 27 years. Sipo left for the mining town with her village folk one time. She went along to earn some money for her family but could not stay long. She saw many deaths of mining laborers there. She decided to return home. So Sipo again decided to leave home at the age of 16 with 6 of her kinfolds to become illegal transnational migrant workers in the city of Chiang Mai, where she has lived and worked ever since.

Sipo also told me that before her father's final burial ritual she received a surprise and urgent phone call from her paternal uncle who had to help take care of his honorable farewell. He asked her to honor her father by donating enough money for the Tai Nua concrete structure tomb instead of bare ground burial. She said that she would send 400,000 Myanmar Kyat. He thanked her for her much-needed contribution. Later on, she was informed by her youngest brother that the paternal uncle pitched in 200,000 Myanmar Kyat and his present wife gave 200,000 Myanmar Kyat. This was possible for her father to have his concrete tomb as his permanent resting place. That was in 2017.

Sipo went home during her 2018 new house warm ritual. She brought Thailand made attractive and lightweight unisex scarfs as well as enough small tubs of Thai Tiger balm as gifts for all her elders from paternal and maternal

sides of her families plus neighbors, who would spend evenings listening to sermons with her mother and family in the new house. She has learned that they love this kind of Thailand made gift items. So the biggest task of having a new and modern home built for the family is done, Sipo still has to save more money for making it livable for her final permanent retirement plan. I seized this opening by asking her what retirement plans would be like when she would be reaching the mandatory 50 years of age and no longer legally could work in Thailand. She right away got out a Thai pinkish plastic-covered card from her handbag. Sipo explained to me as follows. She made use of this Thai ID as a residence ethnic person from one northern district of Chiang Mai province in the past. She then was often required to pay a 2,000 Baht fee after she was notified that her presence outside of the restricted area was expired/took chum nai and should be renewed. She stated the Thai legal term. She went on to say that she then managed to find a local Thai agent that would take care of her Myanmar passport and visa annually which would require her to pay only a 1,000 Baht fee. That was after she was advised to use her Myanmar passport with a visa. She began to use her legal status. She would receive an advance notification with the exact date of her annual visa renewal date. She would need to get her passport in order and should show up at the Chiang Mai Immigration Office to have her visa renewed. She would show up and would get her visa renewed. Thai Chiang Mai Immigration officials would check her name on the official list that would be sent from her visa agency for her name and get her visa stamped. She then would send her 1,000 Baht fee to her visa agency. She likes very much this kind of straight forward service and the amount of fee that she would pay directly to the agency. She got all information on this agency service from her hometown friends who were in Chiang Mai. I did not push for her definite answer but would have guessed that she had been familiarizing herself with all possible options until the mandatory age of 50. Beyond that Sipo would be opened to any door for her life beyond.

Sipo frankly answered my inquiry whether she has thought of her very own marriage as follows.

Yes, I lived with a Tai man from Lashio for one short period a few years ago. We are part of a common Tai transnational migrant worker community. We all follow one common saying as follows: a man and a woman like us have two sets of monthly income. We live together as husband and wife on only one set of our monthly earnings to cover our monthly expenses. We save the other set of income to build our family together. However, after living together for less than one year, I discovered that he was impressed with my saving much more than me as a woman and the future mother of his children. I talked to him and he was not frank about his thoughts and actions. We split up. Not long after the breakup, there also was a Thai foreman of Tai construction workers showed up. He said that he loved Tai workers and liked me very much. He wanted to start a family with me. He asked me whether I was interested in becoming his wife to start a family with him. I said to him that he was nice enough to ask me. We must learn how to get to know each other much more and more importantly, he must accompany me to see my mother and family first. We could take it from there to the next step. He could go to visit my entire family during my annual dry season home leave. He agreed however gradually disappeared through thin air. That was the end of my romantic life.

Sipo's experience as an immigrant worker

Sipo has admitted that she has been blessed for coming to Chiang Mai at the right time and met all generous Chiang Mai bosses. She began to work as daily agriculture labor for 50 Baht per day with free room and board at longan/lamyai small orchard in Fang district, Chiang Mai province. That was after she crossed the Myanmar-Thailand border and she was 16 years old. She had no other job offered. However, less than one month, a male

acquaintance of the orchard caretakers from the city of Chiang Mai came to visit. He was looking for a live-in full-time nanny for his 16 months old youngest daughter. He and his wife sold beef during the day in front of their first floor two-story-shop house in Chiang Mai town. Their two children, teenage daughter, and son attended school all day. He and his wife cooked for the family and that Sipo would be allowed to eat all meals with them. He asked her whether she had any experiences taking care of a baby brother or sister during her growing years in her family. Sipo told him that she was the oldest daughter of her single and divorced mother with two younger siblings of sister and brother. She helped her mother take care of both of them after school. She would try her best in taking care of his baby daughter. Of course, she would ask his wife a lot of questions on the baby habit and so on. She said to him that she liked it when he said that he and his wife were home all the time. Yes, she would love to try her best if he would take her as the nanny. However, she would ask him and his wife for one 30 days leave during the next year's dry season so that she would be able to return home to give her earnings to her mother. After he had a brief private talk to the orchard husband and wife team, he agreed to take her back to Chiang Mai. It was a blessing that he agreed to take Sipo to his Chiang Mai family and that Sipo got her first job as a full time and live-in baby sitter for 2,000 Baht per month with this Muslim beef stand operator.

They treated her well because they liked her fast learning how to take good care of their baby. Moreover, they liked how she always asked them how to provide specific care to their baby when she was not so sure what to do.

Sipo was also very neat and clean in her bodily hygiene and that of their baby daughter. That was so important for his daughter's well-being. So their baby was a healthy and good nature baby. She slept well at night and

Sipo had to wake her up in the middle of the night so that her ward would be able to visit the toilet that would prevent her from wetting the bed. The baby sometimes needed her bottle which she would finish before falling back to sleep until dawn. Other than this, she was not fussy. Sipo's main task would be to take care of her day and night. She understood that she must see to it that she would have enough clean diaper supply for each day and night. She had to wash all soiled diapers which would have to be dry in the sun during the day. She also had to do her laundry daily too because she had such a small set of wardrobe to wear daily. She also was able to eat what the family cooked for themselves. They sometimes took the family to visit a shopping mall to shop and to eat out after work. They were nice to take her and the baby along and paid for Sipo food when she had a meal with them.

The family asked her to keep the baby's bedroom and the baby nice and clean. When they asked her to clean up other bedrooms, the mother would take care of the baby. Sipo did not mind doing regular house cleaning for the family as long as they showed her how and what house cleaning solutions she must use. They taught her to use rubber hand gloves when she would apply various kinds of solutions on sinks, toilets, and floors in the bathrooms and to wash her hands after the completion of the cleaning task. Most importantly, she had to be sure not to touch her face and to hold the baby before washing her hands. "Cleaning solutions must not get into your eyes, ears, and mouth. Take a bath after cleaning before touching the baby", the mother's last instruction.

Things went smoothly during the first year as a nanny and house cleaning job for Sipo. Her employers treated her well. They even gave her a separate bathroom supply such as enough supply of soap, shampoo, toothbrush, and toothpaste for her use. Sipo got to sleep in the room with her ward. She got along well with her ward and who was thriving healthily

and happily. However, Sipo had discovered that the family teenage daughter might have been the real mother of the baby and that she sometimes came to spend some spare time with the baby in the bedroom. She tried to get into her small clothing bag in search of cash. Sipo made that discovery before she would lose her monthly earnings. She had to be extra-careful in hiding her money. Sipo had her intuition very closely observe her and the ward to suspect that the teenage daughter of the family is the khun mae wai sai/ teenage mother.

Sipo was able to write her mother letters but rarely got her reply. She missed her family and village friends. With no opportunity to touch base with them she would concentrate on learning the Thai language through watching television with the family when there was a chance. Besides, her ward began to utter words. Sipo repeated what her ward said words and got big laughter back from her. They together would share daily laughter.

Time went fast. The Chiang Mai seasonal change from hot weather to rainy season to cool-season came and went. The new cycle of the hot season finally came. It was time for Sipo to inform the mother of her ward about the dates of her upcoming departure for annual home leave and Chiang Mai return trip in advance. They agreed on the date of her departure for 30 days and her possible return date as well. They were kind enough to take her to buy a small gold chain to take back to her family instead of taking cash for all her earnings. They saw that she was low in cash and gave her some extra money to take along to be sure that she had enough money to cover all traveling expenses. They said that they liked what good care Sipo did for their daughter. They were looking forward to welcoming her back to their family. They knew that their daughter liked her very much and that she would miss Sipo. At dawn on the fixed departure date, the husband drove Sipo to the Chiang Mai main bus terminal where he helped her to get a Mae

Sai bus ticket first and to sit very close to where the bus was. There would be an announcement to board before the departure time. Passengers would be allowed to board the bus. He slowly explained to her. He was kind enough to buy a bag of biscuits and a bottle of water for her to take along. He explained to her that the bus would stop so many times that she would be able to get out of the bus to buy some food for breakfast on the way. He reminded her to remember the bus number which was on the ticket. He left.

She did not have to wait that long to hear the bus boarding call and a lady in uniform stepped down to invite passengers one by one to board the bus. Sipo followed other passengers and got on the bus. The hostess asked for her ticket which she took from Sipo and walked her over to her seat first. She then wrote down something on her clipboard list. She tore one part of the ticket which she kept and handed back to her the other piece of the ticket. She showed Sipo where she should put her bag in the overhead compartment. Sipo put her lightweight bag in it. Sipo was also told to put a bag of her snack and the bottle of water in the pocket on the back part of the front of her seat. She took her seat and began to adjust herself sitting in a comfortable position for a long ride. The bus filled up quickly. Finally, the driver was in his driving seat. The hostess recounted the total numbers of all passengers against her list. The bus driver finally and slowly drove off.

Sipo valued her first employment the most. She got to work in the most conducive home environment where she was able to learn not only how to care for her ward but to learn basic Thai language from an early age child in the most natural way for three consecutive years. She was secured in earning substantial yearly earnings for her family while not needing to pay for her food and lodging in the strange land in Chiang Mai. Sipo made it very clear to me that her first three years from this Muslim employer had given her a solid start in maintaining her over 27 years of earning more and more

incoming until the present time. Sipo highly treasures it.

Sipo had good experiences with other employers as well. Years ago I took note of how Sipo got her entire mouthful of orthodontic work done. I asked her whether or not her 30 plus years of age were no obstacle. She said that one of her many local employers who was her dentist convinced her to have it done for future old age and offered her a good discount and moreover monthly deductible installment plan from her monthly clinic cleaning fee. Sipo said that she felt so sorry to witness her mother when she could not chew her food every time her bad teeth did not function properly. She suffered and waited until they all would fall off one by one. Sipo moreover surprised me by stating that she was very happy when her dentist employer had offered to her an affordable, deductible, and monthly fee payment. Sipo said to me that her orthodontic teeth shall go to the grave with her in the end. From then on Sipo has been spending more money on regular dental work on her teeth for various works such as having needed filling work for root canal work done and so on. They all would make her life better off when she could chew food properly and that they all would go to the grave with her. Unlike the agricultural land she has accumulated, machinery, and future home for her mother and the family, the orthodontic teeth are entirely hers to enjoy. Sipo was happy that she was able to afford to buy all things under her annual earnings and that she should leave all with them after her passing. Sipo was so frank about giving me she thought on this matter.

After three years as a nanny, Sipo spent the next eight years working for various local Thai employers gave her more experiences that got her ready to become a freelance house cleaner, restaurant and bar worker, and eventually a traditional masseuse. Sipo said to me that she was working all the time. It was possible after she got to buy one 100 Excel, Red Honda Dream, a secondhand for 12,000 Baht. (See two commercial photographs on page 2

that were retrieved on December 1, 2020.) It took her around to make her daily round of work around the city of Chiang Mai much more efficiently and practically all day and night. She was allowed to stop at her apartment to eat her lunch but relying on free dinner at the restaurant from her evening shift work. She enjoyed her freelancing adventure and did not mind at all that she would have only 6 hours of sleep on most days. She was able to send her earnings to her family through bank transfer. This was after her Chiang Mai banker employer helped setting up her first bank account. She worked as her elderly mother's daily caretaker for this banker who appreciated her genuine care that was given to her elderly mother.

Experiencing theft

Sipo also faced banking theft for the first time too. Not very long after Sipo got her first bank account with a bank card for withdrawing, she discovered illegally withdrawing around 80,000 Baht. She went to consult her banker employer who quietly carried out an internal investigation through reviewing the security camera footage. She called Sipo to view the footage. Sipo recognized the culprit as her maternal female cousin who came to work in Chiang Mai on the same day that Sipo did. She kept in touch but did not live in the same apartment building as Sipo did. Sipo told the bank investigator all necessary information that, she did not tell her bank card codes to her cousin, nor anyone else. Sipo was finally informed that she had to report this theft to the police. Sipo did as she was told. Her cousin was arrested. It was a straightforward case. The police were able to gain a full confession from the culprit. In her confession, she revealed that she was able to crack Sipo's bank account card after she accompanied Sipo to withdraw her money only one time. She agreed to return to Sipo some lump sum cash plus one Baht weight of the gold necklace. The police forward her case to the court. The court granted a hearing and finally sentenced her to a prison term to pay for her outstanding amount of money which she was not able to pay back.

She served her prison term for the amount of money she was unable to pay back. Case closed. Sipo and her cousin went on to live their separate lives in Chiang Mai. Sipo hit another snag from her honest job more recently.

Sipo finally got a chance to learn how to do local massage on the job training. She had enjoyed learning new things in her Chiang Mai life. She had accepted an opening on the job training from one local massage operator. She went through rigorous training intermittently for over three month period in the evening. Once she had proven her massage skills, the owner called her to fill in whenever she wanted an extra masseuse. She was also taught other needed skills too when the customer requested it. Most of her customers were elderly foreigners. They preferred her gentle and thorough treatment, not rushing to score more customers for the sake of money. Sipo got very hefty tips from her repeated elderly customers. That was their gratitude. However, some of them left their tips for Sipo with the operator who failed to hand Sipo's tips to her. It happened more times just like what other co-workers had worn her. Sipo kept a closer watch on the operator and one time decided to ask her about her tips which were left for her. The operator expressed her displeasure through her facial expression and grudgingly handed her the tip. Sipo smiled and thanked her but never returned to work for that operator again. Sipo had learned another valuable lesson from the massage world.

Sipo once worked in a bar for the owner who was informed and allowed her to clock in late and to clock out late on her evening shift. The female bar owner knew of her no nonsensical working ethics. Sipo worked the hardest during her working hour. She kept her station nice, neat, and cleaned. Her customers were happy with her earnest service. However, some of her co-workers were jealous of her. One of them wrote on her clock-in card, stating that she was always late in clocking-in. Sipo finally quit because

she did not wish to create a bad example for other co-workers. Why was Sipo under special privilege whereas other co-workers were not?

Sipo always was able to land a new job up until this point. However, after the COVID-19 spread, Sipo so far enjoyed more sleeping hours at night and more time to relax with some Tai and Thai friends. It was the first time in her busy working life in Chiang Mai that she had plenty of time for herself. She spent Loi Krathong/full moon festival night enjoying herself with them. She also spent some late afternoon jogging alone and with them in the Chiang Mai Main Stadium. Sipo reasoned her present lifestyle as follows:

For over 20 years, I had to earn enough for my family. I did just that. I got enough money to have a new and modern home built for them to live in. It would last through our lifetime. My mother presently owns more small plots of low land rice fields and upland crop fields than what she owned during her marriage to my late divorced father. I had contributed to building him his concrete tomb as his resting place after his passing. Oh, by the way, he was reborn as the last and youngest son of my youngest brother. The baby boy was 7 or 8 months old now 9 as (of 2020). Why was I so certain about it, right? I dreamed about him after his passing message which came to me from my youngest brother during his last day. He wanted to inform me of himself of his passing. I also was informed of the birth of my latest nephew after dreaming of my late father the night before. I was able to examine his physical attributes such as structures of his hands and fingers shape as well as his facial structure when I went home last time. My late father's presence is still with us and in our family.

Sipo pointed out to me that she had not concentrated on her formal primary education that much because she had to do what the firstborn of a troubled family had to help out her mother. The elementary school was

located in a neighboring village. She had to walk more than 3 kilometers one way. She worked in the field of their neighbors who paid her in Kyat and/or in kind. They gave her some rice and/or vegetables. She did not know how she was able to go through years of primary mandatory school. No, she did not know how to write nor write Tai. Yes, she can read and write the rudimentary Myanmar language. Myanmar language was the only official language in the Northern Shan States then. In 2015 when you went to conduct a field study in my natal village and you said that you went to observe evening Tai classes that were offered then. Yes, that was officially allowed. Learned monks and Tai who were qualified set up Tai evening classes only during the hot season with no regular school time. Tai students still attend regular classes that are taught in the Myanmar language. In case they attend a private school in the Kyaukme municipality, they are also taught Chinese and English too. The government village school does not offer those foreign language classes to them. I told her that I also observed a computer programming course for some Tai high school graduates, who have to be boarded separately in male and female living quarters in the village monastery ground. That was the summer program, a mobile unit. The headquarters of that program and the Tai language classes were from the Shan State Central Government Headquarters.

“This is the main motivation for me to enroll in the Kor Sor Nor Sunday Thai language classes so that I would be able to read and write Thai after I was able to learn spoken Thai from my first nanny job,” Sipo told me. She also admitted to me that she was so thrilled to learn how to cook Thai food at her jobs during her first 7 years of her Chiang Mai life. She treasures her reading and writing Thai skills that have helped her to get her Thai motorcycle driving license on her ability without buying it. Sipo loves learning how to do proper and professional house cleaning and to be a professional masseuse. All of these training and experiences have equipped her to become a freelance house cleaning in the city of Chiang Mai for over 20 years.

Sipo always treasures her Tai and Thai network of friends that have made her Chiang Mai life functional all of these years. First, I would not be able to leave home at the age of 16 and to travel from Kyaukme to Mandalay. That was simple enough in comparison with more complicated webs of buses from Mandalay through that new and unfamiliar part of Shan for her. The most precarious situation was when they all had to go across the river to Thai soil. Without their kind help, Sipo admitted that she would not be able to lead her productive life in the city of Chiang Mai for over 20 years for her entire family of her divorced mother, one younger sister, and one younger brother.

The first three years of her hot season home furlough Sipo had to depend on the kindness of her illegal Tai transnational migrant worker friend whom she met at Mae Sai before being allowed to join them in making the illegal crossings to Thakhielek and moreover from there to connect either through Mandalay or Lashio and eventually to reach Kyaukme. With all of these kinds of reception from them, Sipo was able to do more home leave trips back and forth for these years. Sipo treasures the Tai network very much. In her freelance job in Chiang Mai, Tai networking made it possible for her to find jobs and to replace her annual home furrow with her connection with Tai network in Chiang Mai.

Sipo took advantage of the availability of affordable technology to enhance her long-distance connection with her Northern Shan State family in Chiang Mai through wireless phone, remittance transmission through banking. She was finally receptive to air travel from Lashio to Kyaukme for her annual home furrow. She also accepted modern dentistry as a preventive and precautionary measurement on her teeth as she was able to afford. She went on doing daily exercise during the COVID-19 era when less work could be found and that she could have enough 8 hours of sleep at night. For over

20 years she was deprived of regular 8 hours of sleep so that she would be able to earn enough money for her family.

Sipo also was responsible for the certain cost of two weddings of her younger sister and younger brother. As for the wedding of her younger sister to the Burmese driver of a gold mine tractor, the obligatory cost was less. Her younger sister left home to earn her living as mining labor at a young age. She found her own man and got herself pregnant and returned home with him for a family marriage ritual among only elders of Sipo maternal and paternal sides. They did well for their family of two sons and were able to return to settle in Sipo natal village. They bought a piece of land and got their one-story brick house with a brick separate kitchen built with their earnings from their mining job. Their two sons were ordained as San Long during the village monastery Poi San Long ritual celebration when the oldest boy was 10 and the youngest was 5. Sipo showed me sets of color photographs of both events.

The young parents gave up mining careers once they settled in his wife's natal village. In the hot season of 2015, they decided to go to work illegally in a factory in Guangdong under the guidance of the younger brother of her youngest sister in law. He of course speaks Chinese fluently and holds a line supervisor in a factory. They were able to work and have earned enough money. They decided to return home on their own and got caught at their cross border checkpoint. They were jailed and got their money confiscated. They were deported back without their confiscated earnings. That was during the time that I was doing my 2015 village study in that village. I took care of the two boys for about 30 days. I left their village before their parents were released and thrown out of China penniless. I left with their maternal grandmother about 185,000 Myanmar Kyat for them. She first refused because she saw that I also bought daily fresh meat and vegetables to cook daily meals

for them. Their maternal grandmother or Sipo's mother went to visit her relatives who live in Tai Tai Kong territories where she was born. She came to live in the Northern Shan State area after she married Sipo's father. He and his parents left their Tai Kong birthplace to escape the taking over the area with communism and socialist government. Anyway, Sipo's younger sister and the Burmese brother in law returned home heartbroken. He turned to drink heavily and lived with back pain that came from driving a heavy tractor on his gold mine job and finally passed by in 2017. At present, Sipo's younger sister's widow and her 20 years old oldest son came to work in Bangkok (as of 2020). The 15 years old youngest son lives in his parent's home but eats all his daily meals with Sipo's mother and his maternal uncle and his family. He has to complete his secondary schooling and is left behind by his mother and his oldest brother.

Others less fortunate than Sipo

I got to meet Sipo's late father during my 2015 village stay when I lived with his two grandsons while their parents went to work in Guangdong, China. It was by a chance meeting. I was in the vicinity of his home where he has been living with his present wife and their 15 years old son. I was visiting one family whose house was a much smaller and shabbier bamboo house with a dirt floor where the grandmother and her bachelor son live together. The grandmother asked her grandson, my contact, to invite me to her house where she gave him some money to get her one can of soft drink and a bag of biscuits. She then put them in a small wooden tray. She presented the tray to me as I was her honorable Thailand guest. She was so certain that I would have crucial information on her other son who went to work in Thailand years ago but never kept in contact. It was allowed for a Tai mother to have one son as her caretaker and one other son would be serving in the Shan State Army. She was so concerned about this long silence of her wayward son who went to search for work in Thailand and wondered whether he was arrested

for not reporting to the Shan State Army. She told me that she had to sell her gold necklace to sponsor his Thailand trip. She was poor. She made bamboo sun shades from bamboo barks which were sold in the Kyaukme Market for a living. She did all the sewing and taking her finished products to sell in the Kyaukme Market. She got some money from her married daughter who lived nearby with one son who invited me to visit his home. He was a student of Tai language evening classes that took place at the village monastery during the hot season school break in 2015.

After listening to her story about her son, I explained to her slowly that Thailand was a big country. I came from Chiang Mai, a city in the northern part of Thailand. I only knew Sipo, the oldest daughter from his first marriage to the first wife of her across the square neighbor who lives with his present wife with his 15 years old son. I was so sorry that I had no information on her son who went to work in Thailand but had never kept in contact. I said that I would hope that her son would eventually contact her. While we were talking, we were interrupted by her caretaker son who said that Sipo's father sent word to him that he wanted to invite me to his home too. With that, I thanked her for her hospitality and for offering me the snack and sharing with me her grief. I took leave. Her caretaker son walked me across the square over to Sipo father's new home⁴.

⁴ The other occasion I saw the mother and caretaker son was the early morning of my departure date of my 2015 village stay. While standing and waiting for my Kyaukme-Mandalay early bus by the bus stop of the village, I saw both mother and son pushing their bike which was loaded with their homemade bamboo sun shades heading to the Kyaukme Market. We were on the opposite side of the highway, I made no attempt to give them my recognition. My simple hand wave would have been so puzzling to them because they probably would not have recognized our short and chance meeting during my first week of village stay. However, I admired her for her dedication to her sons, daughter and grandson from what she had shared with me, so I had a special place for her in my village's memory. Besides, I admired them for walking and pushing a bike with a full load of their homemade handicrafts for the 45 minute market walk. Life was a struggle for villagers like them who had no chance to be part of the transnational migrant era.

Visiting Sipo's parents in her natal village

I was received by Sipo's father at the gate of his compound. He invited me to go into his living where he got a Thai soap opera rerun program on color television. He did not say much but kept on watching the television. Finally, he said that he knew about my visit and my stay with his two grandsons while their parents were in Guangdong. He went on to say that he would like me to take his 15 years old son back to Thailand with me. His son saw me at the home of his second daughter and her Myanmar husband when he went to spend some time with the two sons of his half older sister. I listened to his monotone request while fixing his gaze on the television screen. I thanked him for inviting me to his home and to be entrusted with his 15 years old son. As a retired pensioner, there was no way that I would be able to sponsor a Tai worker into my household. Besides, his 15-year-old son is still a minor on top of that. He said nothing. Then I thanked him again for inviting me into his home. I took leave.

My other encounter with Sipo's father took place at another specific dinner. He had demanded that his youngest son and his wife invite me to have dinner with him at his divorced first wife's home while she was visiting her family in China. The dinner offered one deep-fried medium size of local fish, vegetable soup, and one more dish of green salad. It was served with hot nam neng/hot tea. Sipo's father drank some local homemade clear rice whisky. He said that he knew that I took no alcohol drink. I said to him that it was for health reasons. We ate dinner quietly. At appropriate after dinner time, I thanked him for the dinner. I went to thank both of his son and daughter in law before I took leave. That was the extent that I met Sipo's father during my 2015 village stay.

I got to know Sipo's mother after she had come back from her China home visit. She got stuck thereafter one of her elderly relatives had died. She

had to stay to observe 100 days of mourning of Tai Nua in her natal village in the Tai Tai Kong vicinity. She thanked me for taking care of her two grown-up grandsons so far. She also came over to her second daughter's home and went to fetch a thick cotton comfort from one bedroom for me to use as my mattress over the wooden bed. She occasionally brought over some green salad with drill favor for me because she was told that I preferred to eat more vegetable dishes and ate no meat. However, she did know that I cooked meat dishes for her grandsons even though I no longer ate them. She came to clean the living room which I used as my bedroom while I was there in the 2015 hot season. I suspected that she had learned what I did for her two grandsons before and after returning home. She did not want to accept my money envelope that I asked her to keep for her second daughter. She was a very kind person to all of her grandsons and granddaughters. Despite her marriage hardship and eventual divorce, she has maintained her matron status of the family with calm measurement. Perhaps she has been a strong force in keeping her tattered family together after the divorce from Sipo's father.

I also took note of the only daughter in law of Sipo's family. She was a quiet mother of two daughters and one son (as of 2020). In my 2015 village stay with the two nephews, I took note of how the 10 years old one got a bad cough at night. One time he coughed a lot more at night when the weather was cold. I first bought some caught liquid medicine from a local pharmacy for him to take. He still had a persistent night cough after the first bottle of liquid medicine was gone. I went over to share my concern with Sipo's sister-in-law. She listened. She then came over to her sister-in-law's home where I was staying. She got a hold of the coughing nephew. She asked him to peel off his t-shirt and to sit still on a wooden low bench and to wait for her there. She went into the family kitchen and came back out with one spoonful of vegetable cooking oil. She sat down on another bench. She used

a metal lid of a beer bottle which she began to gently scrape a small area in small spots all over the oil-soak back of the boy. She spent more time doing more scraping. The boy began to sob. In the end, his entire well-oiled back was full of small reddish spots. She stopped and explained to the boy and me that the bad heat in his system had been scraped from in his internal system onto the surface of his back. She would not repeat her treatment unless the boy continued to cough throughout the night.

I asked what her treatment was called. And where she had learned how to perform this task. In her home village in another town, every mother knew how to do this task, especially when their children had night coughs during the cold weather. Khoo /scrape/-sa and/or/ /khoo sang/ disease that is believed as bad heat/ was what it was known for and had to be scraped out of his system. From tonight onward, he would be able to sleep with less coughing, and that the coughing would eventually be gone. The boy began to have his normal night sleep and was not treated again during the duration of my village stay⁵.

⁴ As noted in the beginning of these notes, due to the limitation of space for this journal, I am only allowed to present the first part of my entire 'research notes' paper. Sipo's 'life history' and 'life course' very much relates to the cultural practice in which Tai women cut their spools of long hair to offer to Buddha during the annual Poi Sang Long/young boys ordination ritual. I also discovered another cultural practice of honoring Meun Chao/abbot of a monastery who passes away by decorating his coffin with a cradle. This cultural practice is known as 'rocking cradle' ritual as the last wake period prior to the cremation rite.

