

CHAPTER 5

THREATENING BORDER LIVELIHOODS AND CONTESTING BORDER IDENTITY

[P]laces come into being through praxis.

Hugh Raffles (1999: 339)

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to show how the capital and states advance access and control of the Salween borderlands through frontier capitalization. The hegemonic capitalist markets and states produce the meaning of nature as commodity. The Salween River is turned into hydroelectric production for trade, and in turn it generates economic growth and progress. In this way, the border people became people who live ‘naked lives’, in the sense that capital/states have excluded them from their resources and dehumanized them. However, the advancement of frontier capitalization does not go smoothly; rather, it is contested. In a Gramscian sense, subaltern struggle refers to contesting meaning (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci’s notion of hegemony reminds us that dominant meanings are always contested, never totalizing, and always unstable, even as they encourage degrees of subordinate people’s “consent” to particular forms of oppression (Moore 1993: 383). Due to his belief in humanity, Gramsci proposes that subalterns only contest meaning in order not to be dehumanized, but he does not clarify the subaltern struggle in what kind of condition. Polanyi further states that subordinated people struggle not only because they want to have human dignity, but also livelihood. This is what Polanyi calls “the problem of human livelihood” in societies (Polanyi 1977). In a Polanyian sense, natural resources are the basis of life, and livelihood generates a ‘double movement’ (Polanyi 1980). For protecting livelihoods, the border people have resisted against the capital/states capitalization of nature – transnational enclosure in which they are excluded from resources. The border people have attempted to protect their livelihoods from the state/market’s threats and to oppose the Salween dam projects proposed by the capital market and state, and the ensuing conflicts over access to the Salween resources also induce a contesting meaning of identity.

Basically, the Salween borderlands do not mean only geo-physical sites, but also social and cultural spaces in which the border people have a long history. They have recalled this history back to express their identity and standpoint of struggle to protect their rights and resources. As such, the Salween borderlands have become sites of local struggle and livelihood negotiation. As Moore points out, struggles over land and environmental resources are struggles over cultural meaning, which reflects the relationship between identity and locality (Moore 1993: 283). Claims to historical roots and connections to experiences of locality are created in dealing with a new situation. Struggles are often in relation to place, as changing space means that identity must be negotiated and transformed (Moore 1997: 92, 103-04). In other words, negotiated space can be seen through discourse that interprets the place (Kuper 1972; Raffles 1999). This is a process of place-making which is not natural; but socially constructed. And place-making transforms into belonging through 'sense of belonging' which relates to a sense of entitlement to occupy and use a given space (Hammar 2002: 228). In this regard, the politics of location refers to the power of possession, in which a particular place belongs to specific social categories (individual person, group of people, or even the state), and sense of belonging refers to identity constructed through intimate experience in particular place. The border people have claimed that the Salween borderlands, namely forests and rivers, belong to them in order to deal with the capitalist market and state. The Salween River and its surrounding forests thus become sites for struggle and political negotiation at the same time. The border people have created their identity for their particular purpose via identifying that place and sense of belonging.

The negotiation process reflects the efforts of the border people to construct a counter meaning to the dominant meaning of commodity identified by capitalist market and state. Contesting constructed meaning and being part of the production of space has been practiced at the Thai-Burmese border by the border people. This chapter concerns the process of negotiation through which the border people have produced and contested spaces. I elaborate upon the threatening border livelihoods and contesting border identity, beginning with constructing border livelihoods, and social memory and the Salween borderlands. This is followed by cultural lore as contested space.

5.1 Constructing Border Livelihoods

Livelihood is not unimportant. Livelihood may be the most important of all human activities.

Anna Tsing (1999: 5)

The re-territorialization of state control over natural resources at the Salween borderlands and commodification of the Salween River are processes of state and market exclusion that prohibit the border people access to the Salween resources and turn the Salween River into hydro-electricity. As Salween resources are their basis of life and livelihood, those processes of exclusion are threatening their resource-based livelihoods. However, the border people have attempted to protect their livelihoods. Since the commodification of the Salween River has taken place, conflicts over access to the Salween forest and fish are two main sites of struggle at the Thai-Burmese border. This section explores how the state and market's exclusion threatens the border people's lives and livelihood.

5.1.1 Contesting Salween Forest

The lives of border people have been threatened by Thailand's natural resource conservation policy – both a wildlife sanctuary and a national park have been implemented at the Thai-Burmese border. During one of the discussions among village representatives and the Center for River Training students in July 2007, Naree pointed out that there are actually a lot of small communities that have settled down in the forest along the Salween's tributary. The Karens who live in the forest know how to protect the forest very well. This is because forest protection is ingrained in their traditional beliefs: beliefs that help to control villagers' use of natural resources and products from the jungle and also from the streams. But conflict, especially with the government authorities, became inevitable because the villagers are perceived as destroyers of forest. "So that ten years ago," Naree said, "villagers organized a forest ordination ceremony and invited many friends from their networks, from Laos, China, and other villages as well. They did this because they want to use their traditional

beliefs to reflect on how they can manage the forest on their own and to show the outsiders, especially the state authorities, how people have lived in and with the forest without decimating it.” Villagers have struggled for a community forest bill that will allow local communities to live in the protected forest areas.

As national conservation policies and modern forest management began to justify government activities in the forest, the Royal Forest Department began to establish protected areas throughout Thailand. The Salween National Forest Reserve was established in 1972; the Salween Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1978; and the Salween National Park was established in 1994. However, law enforcement was not successful: strict enforcement of forest laws existed only on paper. The Salween forest in the Salween Wildlife Sanctuary and Salween National Park should be safe from commercial logging, but as we can see, the reality is different. These three forest areas overlapped with logging concession areas¹ (Veerawat 2005: 8-10). In the past, there were many trees along the Salween River, but now the Salween forest area has decreased.

Veerawat Dheeraprasart, a former Thai Forester, asserts that the legal granting of logging concessions have led to illegal logging in the Salween forest areas (Veerawat 2005: 45). Bon Bea Luang village is center for business as well as a place that has resources such as minerals, timber, and non-timber forest and agricultural products along the Thai-Burmese border. In the past, teak logs cut down in the Salween forest were floated along the Salween River and collected at this village. This business boomed during 1980s-1990s. Illegal logging in the Salween area was a massive operation that illustrated the outrageous defiance of the country’s laws (Veerawat 2005: 30). In January 2009, Ai Birm, a local NGO activist, explained, “Logging was extensive before 1995. There used to be a huge number of floating logs on the Salween River. “When the officials were given bank notes (by logging traders), they did not need to count. They divided bank notes at equal height.”

¹ Logging companies, such as the East Asiatic, were granted logging concessions. The East Asiatic’s concessions were later transferred to the British-owned Bombay Burma. When the concessions given to Bombay Burma expired, Thailand’s Forest Industry Organization (FIO) took over the teak logging concessions. Private companies still had logging concessions for other hardwoods in the same concessions forest areas. These private logging firms included Prince Wattana Chotana, Prince Arporn Suwansing, the Veteran Welfare Organization and Mae Hong Son Tam Mai (Veerawat 2005: 9).

Significantly, the illegal logging in the Salween is a cross-border issue in which many groups of people are involved, and the government's measures to address this problem in the Salween are ambiguous.² In this case, the border was used by the logging companies in operating the nationalization of the logs.³ Veerawat explains the process of nationalization of the logs in this way:

After the enforcement of the 1989 ban on logging in Thailand, Thai logging companies relocated their logging operations to Burma. But when the Burmese forest areas depleted, the Thai loggers moved back to the Salween forest, which was located in the Thai-Burmese border area. Trees in the Salween forest were cut down and hauled across the river to be kept in Burma, awaiting a certificate of origin verifying that they were Burmese logs. Then they were 'nationalized' as Burmese logs and re-imported into Thailand. This process was known as 'Burmese dressing of Thai logs' (Veerawat 2005: 38-39).

It has been shown that the logging traders associated with politicians, state officials, ethnic forces, the Burmese government, and local villagers, combining legal and illegal operations in running logging. Even though the wildlife sanctuary and national park laws, including 1989 logging ban regulation in Thailand for wildlife and forest conservations are existed, but illegal logging was still applied. In addition, politicians played the most active role in illegal logging operations by approving the border passes to import logs from Burma. The border people insisted that illegal logging is conducted by influential log traders, who can make their lives unsafe or even assassinate them. Ai Chamnan explained: "When illegal logging boomed, many lumber trees were cut down in the forest, around our villages. If you ask why we didn't forbid them, the answer is that we actually could not stop them. You can do

² The Salween (illegal) logging is very complex situation in that its movement involved eight major groups of people: local villagers, minority group immigrants from Burma, local influential groups, log trading companies and the wood processing industry, dominant businesses, state officials, politicians, and the Burmese government (Veerawat 2005: 17-34).

³ Six forms of illegal logging are nationalization of the logs, log laundering, inflicting premature death on the trees, re-launching of logs, recycling of logs, and transforming of logs (Veerawat 2005: 38-42).

that if you want to die. Log traders *keb* (hire gunman to assassinate) easily. It's only 100,000 baht a head." Therefore, illegal logging has slowed down, but not stopped entirely.

The forest lands around Bon Bea Luang village are part of the Salween National Park. During a hot day in February 2010, I visited Nongnut, a Shan resident of Bon Bea Luang, at her home located along a narrow road. She is currently a village committee member. She works on the issues of citizenship and child rights by coordinating with the local NGO. The villagers in her home are concerned about the land issue, including utilization of land and land for housing. Nongnut reflected upon the real situation: "Nothing! Mountain is in the front, stream is in the back (*khangna koh doi, khanglang koh namhouy*) If the rain comes, we are back to our fears.

The villagers thought that they should have utilization lands (*thitamkin*) and housing lands (*thiplukban*). Government officials, particularly rangers (*thaharn phran*) and national park officers (*chaonathi uthayan*), have to find solution for them. They also talked to the local NGO staff on how to solve the land issue. "We talked to foresters (*chaonathi pamai*) and *thaharn phran*, but we could not come to any sort of agreement with them. No agreement of any sort! There is not any progress yet. Recently, Ai Birm talked with the officials about this. They are thinking about it, but it is not clear yet," said Nongnut. The villagers see this as the most urgent problem that needs to be resolved, but no one seems to have any solution or to be able to handle the situation.

The Royal Forestry Department sees swidden farming as destructive and thus the Karen villagers are blamed as the major culprits of the illegal logging. Law enforcement was employed as the principal instrument to stop them from cutting down trees (Veerawat 2005: 19). Many years ago, there was a case in which forest rangers tried to arrest villagers of Su Mo Ke, a village located on a tributary of the Salween River. Before the harvest, the foresters had a forest patrol and then they went to eat lunch at one of the villagers' rice fields. The field was destroyed. So villagers asked them pay a fine, but they refused to pay. The forest rangers then went down to inform at the office. The next afternoon, they came again to arrest an elderly man who possessed two illegal guns at the rice field, and other two men and a woman ran away to escape from them into the forest and stayed overnight without any food or

mosquito nets. On the same day, the village head went down to inform district officials that those three villagers were lost in the forest. The next morning, officials including volunteers, officials, foresters, and rangers went in search of the lost villagers, but they could not find them. Later the three villagers came back home safely. *Lung Danai*, a village spokesman said, “Later the foresters were scolded by rangers. The rangers said, ‘Why don’t you know that this area is the villager’s rice field? If they actually are lost, who will be responsible for it?’” It was obvious that the villagers used this incident to discredit foresters, because some of them already knew that these three villagers were not lost, but they were at the house of a neighboring villager. As a result, the foresters were blamed by other officials. Even though villagers were afraid of the foresters, this incident made them feel that they had a chance to retaliate against them.

The Thai and Burmese states, as well as the Chinese state and corporations, have worked to expand the capitalization on the Salween borderlands through the Salween dam projects proposed in 1980s. Of course, illegal logging and dam construction as outcomes of capitalizing resource frontiers are related. As *Veerawat* explains, the Salween dams, such as *Tasang Dam*, would be several times more disastrous because the dam is much bigger than other dams in Thailand. Its reservoir would cover a massive area that now is mostly teak forests, including areas surrounding the Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park. This would re-launch logging through the reservoir (*Veerawat 2005: 41*).

The issue of dam construction made the border people more nervous. The topic of the Salween dams, whether or not should be built, is highly debated and argued. *Nongnut* explained, that, some groups and some Thais like the idea. But most of the villagers in the border zones do not accept the dams. She said: Yesterday, there was a quarrel at my home. A man who is an outsider staying in the village said, ‘There are many benefits from dam. Villagers are stupid. Why don’t you like it? They come to bring progress to villagers.’ The villagers here said, ‘You have land. If you cannot stay here, you will go back to your hometown. But we have nowhere to go.’ Most of us disagree with the dam construction project. Only a few think that the dams should be constructed, and they are mostly people from outside the village who came to stay temporarily to run shops and businesses.

Modern dam technology and knowledge will convert the Salween River into hydropower. The push for economic growth in the GMS is a driving force that overlooks the lives of the border people. Since the EGAT has been promoting the Salween dam projects to the public, they have usually said that the area that will be inundated is a no-man's land, meaning that nothing lives along the Salween River except for animals and trees. A high-ranking staff member of the EGAT said, only 3 percent of the reservoir area, approximately 3,200 hectares (20,000 *rai*),⁴ is within the Thai boundary and there are no human beings living in the flooding area due to the high mountains on both sides of the Salween River; in fact even wild animals do not live here (Montree and Landharima 2007: 239).

The role of the EGAT at the Thai-Burmese border is to persuade the people of the Salween borderlands to support the Salween dam projects. Eventually, the EGAT became involved in helping the border people, even though it is not the EGAT's duty. In the 2006 case of the three villagers from Su Mo Ke, the villagers were arrested and taken to the police station for illegally cutting trees for building houses. Their families bailed them out. The following year, they were sued in a criminal court. The court declared them to be guilty of illegal logging. However, the judge cut their punishments in half due to their confession. The first villager was sentenced to imprisonment for six years and a fine of 210,000 baht. The second villager was sentenced to a six-month suspension and a fine of 70,000 baht. The third villager was sentenced to a two year suspension and fined 210,000 baht. The Community Development Center, a local NGO, helped them to appeal the sentences, asking the court to decrease their punishments. Finally, the judge kept the same punishments at the criminal court for the first two villagers, but decreased the third villager's punishment. The first defendant was imprisoned. The second defendant bailed out and decided to pay the 210,000 baht fine later. The third defendant paid the fine of 20,000 baht and went home.

The second villager's case is more complicated than the others because there are many people involved with it, including the EGAT in an indirect way. Samai, a member of the Community Development Center staff, explained: Even before the case went to the judge for trial, Ms. Pu, a Mae Sariang resident, came to talk to us

⁴ One *rai* is approximately 1,600 square meters.

about this case at our center. She said that she was not a staff of the EGAT, but that the EGAT had hired her to do work on public relations with the villagers. She asked, 'what are you going to do about this case?' I said 'we cannot do anything right now. We have to wait until the judgment.' I understood that there was another person to *vingten* (arrange) the process for her. She said, 'I have a connection to contact a prosecutor or someone in the court to help him. So, I would appreciate it if you use my help.'

After this discussion, she went to discuss with the judge and the court officer, even though the NGO staffs did not ask for her help.

According to the law, the defendant has to pay fine within 30 days. Three days before deadline, the defendant, along with Te Yaw, a local Karen and a Community Development Center staff member, went to pay fine at the court office, but a court lawyer rejected it, claiming that the matter was not approved by the judge yet. At the time, the judge was not there. According to the procedure, they had to wait for the approval of the Provincial Court Head instead. Te Yaw said, "I was very angry. I didn't know why he didn't allow us to pay the fine. I called to consult a lawyer who has closely worked with us in Chiang Mai. As there was no time for waiting, he suggested that we would have to request for the date to be extended by another 30 days and he would come to meet us within days at our center and advise us about what to do next. However, the court lawyer allowed only a 15 days extension." They went back without paying the fine.

Ms. Pu had been following the case. As local activists understood, she intervened in the court process and also helped the defendant pay the fine. Samai said, "Two days later, a meeting to discuss about this case was to take place in the afternoon. The participants were Samai, Te Yow and the lawyer from Chiang Mai. Ms. Pu was also invited to join the meeting. However, she brought the defendant to pay the fine in the morning before the meeting. She informed Te Yow, via phone, that the fine was already paid." Therefore, the case was finished and she didn't come to join the meeting.

The Salween borderlands have been identified as forest areas for conservation. However, influential local groups, forest officials, logging companies and the processing industry, dominant businesses, and politicians are allowed to exploit the

Salween forest through logging concessions. Even though there are laws to protect the forest areas, law enforcement has failed to protect forest. Forest laws were eventually suspended for the capitalist market to reap the benefits of illegal logging. This implies that state's politicizing helps the rich to gain more profit, but the poor loose benefits.

In summary, since the Salween Wildlife Sanctuary and Salween National Park were established, the border people have been threatened by the forest officials and excluded from natural resources. The border people, who are labeled as “weevils eat up all the wood” (Pinkaew 2005: 51) or “forest thieves” (Hoang 2007), have claimed that the main cause of forest degradation in the Salween borderlands is logging rather than their traditional land use practices. The logging companies had got concessions from the government, whereas the forest officials have always alleged that the border people cut down trees illegally and the foresters fined them or arrested them and put them in jail. The border people have argued that their lives depend on the Salween forests. They have identified forest is their basis of life. It is a forest-based livelihood. Nevertheless, the Salween dam projects are on their way, which will cause the border people's lives to be worse. The new capitalists and transnational dam investors came to the Thai-Burmese border zones to maintain the resource frontier in which they reap the benefits, but harm the border people's lives. Hence, they have strategically attempted to get the border people's consent to build the Salween dams, by establishing good public relations with them. Therefore, they seized the opportunity to express their sympathy to villagers who were in trouble and persuaded them to accept their offers.

5.1.2 Contesting Salween Fish

When I visited Saw Myin Dong village at the beginning of the monsoon in 2010, *Ai Kai*, a resident of the village, expressed that the villagers are proud of their lives. They really love their lives right there. They have enough for everything they need. They have plenty of rice and fish. “The best thing is the Salween River,” *Ai Kai* said and smiled. Likewise, a resident of the same village named *Pi Somjit* added, “We catch a lot of fish in the Salween River. Women also catch them in the small stream. You can use a special basket, a small net to catch little shrimps, crabs, and

small fishes, and both up and down the stream. We can collect wild vegetables. It is very abundant, there is a lot of food here.”

Fish in the Salween and Moei rivers are very abundant. The villagers’ research found 70 fish species in the Salween River and its tributaries (Salween Pgä K’nyau Research Team 2005). Furthermore, information collected by people from three villages associated with Foundation for Ecological Recovery (FER), known as the “Salween Study,” identified up to 83 species of fish and aquatic animals. Some are endemic and rare species, such as the *Butterfish silundia* and the *Rita sacerdotum*. Previous studies conducted by fishery experts have identified at least 170 fish species in the Salween River Basin, many of which are endemic. According to fishery experts, there could be between 200 and 500 species of fish in the Basin (Montree and Landharima 2007: 26).

On February 19th, 2010, I met Srithong and his two friends, Chan and Sao, who were born in Muang Mean village. I invited the three of them and a boat driver to talk together. “I have several questions to ask you guys, both specific (individual) and general. First of all, what changes do you see in the village, from the time you were young until now? What about environmental changes?” I inquired.

Srithong said, “There are too many people. When I was child, you know, there were only six households in this village. Now I am 37 years old. Life was easy in the past, growing rice and gathering forest products, and fishing. But now it’s difficult to survive. We cannot get enough fish and wild animals.”

“Where did you catch fish?” I asked.

The boat driver replied, “The Salween River and Moei River.”

Srithong added, “The best time to catch fish is in May. In the past we used fishing gear. We caught four to five fish a day. The fish weighed 10-40 kilograms. But now we only catch one fish in two or three days, and the fish weigh only about five to six kilograms. The number of fish is declining, which is not the same as in the past.”

Sao also said, “In the past, in a day we caught four fish and the total weight was over 100 kilograms. The weight of each fish was 25 kilograms to over 30 kilograms. Now we cannot catch fish like that. There are too many people catching fish.”

“So, have they disappeared or are you not able to catch them?” I asked to clarify.

Srithong confirmed, “The fish stock has decreased a lot. Everything has declined!”

“I think the fish are gone and there are too many people. Our incomes have also declined,” Sao supported.

I followed, “What is your source of income now?”

Sao explained, “Growing rice, and planting i.e. crops like chili, tobacco, pumpkin, and corn, at the riverbank, as well as fishing. We start growing in October, when the water level decreases, and in the dry season. We grow tobacco in March. It brings in good income. Now tobacco is 120 baht per kilogram, khae fish (catch fish – pla khae) is 100 baht per kilogram, khom fish (scale fish – pla khom) is 120 baht per kilogram and other fish is 50-60 baht per kilogram.”



Figure 5.1 Karen Woman and Salween Fish: “I am very happy”

Collecting wild plants and animals and fishing now are more difficult than in the past. Sao said, “The price of fish is increasing. They explained that in the past fish was cheap – it was only 60 baht per kilogram – but now it is 100-120 baht per kilogram. However, there is very little fish left. It is good income if they can capture it.” It is difficult to survive because they are no longer able to catch enough fish and wild animals. Therefore, in order to preserve and protect fish and other wild animals,

the villagers of Saw Myin Dong have, for example, set up the fish conservation zone. The length of the fish conservation zone is one kilometer along the stream. They do not take them from the River, and they also try to give back to the nature.

To sum up, threats to the Salween forestland and to fishing as a resource-based livelihood have become the main arguments used by border people to deal with the Salween dam construction projects, and as I have shown, these resource-based livelihoods are being threatened by the re-territorialization of state control and commodification of the Salween River. The border people are accused of being forest destroyers, and those who practice shifting cultivation are stereotyped as forest thieves, whereas in fact, the main cause of deforestation is illegal logging. Furthermore, these dam projects will escalate the destruction of the forest along the Salween borderlands, as the forest lands and rivers will be inundated, adversely affecting local livelihoods, because the people who live there rely on these same resources. Hence, people living in the area feel insecure about their future livelihoods, and so have raised the issue of forest and fish resource depletion as a contested space – to argue against the conservation and development policies of the state. However, the border people's production of the meaning of livelihoods, in order to contest the capitalist market and the state's meaning of commodity, has still been insufficient to deal with the frontier capitalization on display at the Salween borderlands, mainly because the border people are invisible within the commodification of resources process.

5.2 Social Memory and the Salween Borderlands

The border people have tried to secure their livelihoods. They have competed with the capitalist market and state to take control of territory and resources. Strategically, they have shifted the confrontation sites in order not to be in a disadvantaged position in the ongoing contestation. In the commodification of resources by the capitalists and the states, the border people are excluded from their resources and dehumanized as 'imperceptible naked lives' (Decha 2003). The Salween resources are turned into universal commodities, and the border people, as inhabitants, become invisible. Nonetheless, they have used their legacy and history as "social memory" (Raffles 1999) to ideologically construct and represent their identity

as local people with history in order to claim rights and belonging over the resources in the Salween borderlands. This section explores the border people's process of making their position and identity at the Thai-Burmese border as local people with history.

5.2.1 Claiming Inheritance

Centralized governments, in trying to tame both the nature and people who live on the margins of their sphere of influence, are trying to provide for themselves a sort of strategic “buffer zone” to guard against outside aggressions.

Christopher R. Duncan (2004: 13)

“If the *chaydaen* (border) is a fence, we are pillars of the fence.”

Ai Chamnan, a spokesman of Saw Myin Dong (February 14th, 2010)

With the gradual modernization of the state of Siam, the role of Karens as frontier guards also gradually wore away, and by 1910 the Karens no longer populated strategically important frontiers. Non-Thai groups and tribal groups were viewed as separate, and it was argued that the Karens should be assimilated into Thai life. In addition, the conditions on the western border of Siam were such that the Thais no longer depended on the Karens in western border relations, and dealings between the Karens and Thais dwindled. The Karens in Thailand were thus unable to rise in status when the royalty no longer required Karens' assistance and as such no longer took interest in their welfare. They lost their political status, their strategic importance and their economic base. In 1923, the Karens were citizens, but most of them felt abandoned again (Renard 1980: 157-222). Presently, however, their position is ambiguous and many of them are treated neither as full citizens of Thailand nor fully as aliens (Keyes 1979b: 53). However, the concept of Karens as border guards has been continually used by the Thai Karen group at the border.

According to Keyes, the identity of Karens derives not only from their cultural belief in being speakers of the same language, but also from myths and folk history that define them as different from their neighboring groups. Common to these myths

and histories is the cultural belief, constantly reiterated, that they are in some ways (in power, in wealth, in knowledge) inferior to the dominant lowland people. The Karens retain fairly concrete memories of their subordinate positions in premodern Thailand. They both the Pwos of Mae Sariang and the Sgaws of Chiang Mai still retain memories, encompassed in their folk histories, of their subordinate positions within Burmese society (Keyes 1979a: 11), and of their position as forest people in the region. The Karens' legacy is playing a significant role at the present historical juncture.

The Karens are important in the history of relations between Thailand and Burma. The Karens have played significant role in frontier defenses for Thailand (Siam) since at least the 18th century when Thailand and Burma did not trust each other. As border people, they affiliated with Thailand and the Thai state that protected them. In the post-Cold War era, the role of the Karens as political buffer ended when both Thailand and Burma saw the possibilities of shared benefits from economic development of the borderland. Within the shared economic possibilities lies the possibility or inevitability of the suppression of ethnic minorities who inhabit these borderlands. As the Karens' confrontation site, the frontier guard is becoming weak.

The Salween borderlands have been used as political base for struggles. The Karens have used armed resistance against the Burmese government and sought to avoid incorporation (Duncan 2004: 16). However, their political organization (the KNU), which called for a federal union of Burma, split into two parties during the political struggle against the Burmese junta. Therefore, they became weak in their political struggle inside Burma. In contrast, the Burmese junta-backed government is getting stronger in legitimating its claim over territories.

As a result of the warfare situation and national security concerns, the border people who live in the Salween borderlands were identified as "the other." They were excluded to be neither people of Thailand nor of Burma. In order to contest this marginalization, they have identified themselves as 'frontier guards' to relate to their history and to deal with the dominant state narrative about them. How have the border people perceived themselves in relation to the Salween River? Ai Chamnan, a spokesman of Saw Myin Dong village said: "Someone said this area is the border

(*chaydaen*). Of course, *chaydaen* is the fence of the country. They are pillars of fence.” I was surprised by his answer. During the conversation, I thought that his idea would be different from the modern concept of border. Instead, he had the same idea and he supported it. The modern concept of a border goes like this: the border is a fence cannot be alone. The fence really needs pillars to hold and fix together; otherwise, the border cannot be a fence to protect inside property from outside. Therefore, the Karens identify themselves as pillars of fence, which means that they are an important element in helping the state boundary exist and function to protect its country. As the Burmese state has strategically modeled “civilizing the margins” (Duncan 2004) and the Thai state and the EGAT have strategically modeled “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 2003) at the Salween borderlands, the border people are squeezed by development projects. If they are not wealthy or are in trouble, the pillars would no longer exist, the fence of the state would collapse. Therefore, state boundary would not function to protect the country which might cause insecurity of the state.

In 2008, the EGAT came to Saw Myin Dong village for a meeting with the villagers on the dam issue. They told villagers that if the government built the Hatgyi Dam, the government will take accountability for affected people by managing land allocation, paying compensation, and training them for jobs, such as producing dishwashing liquid and soap. But villagers did not accept these proposals because they are concerned about their livelihoods and that new skills for jobs might not be appropriate. They also worry that no one would like to buy their new production. Thus, they prefer to stay in the same place. As *Moh Yupin* said: “We can move our house but how can we move our rice fields? How can we live without farmlands?”

Even though the people think that they are weak compared to state authorities, they are clear in their intentions to find ways to accumulate more and more negotiating powers. One of the strategies the border people have used is to refer to the King’s theory of sufficiency economics. This theory is very powerful in Thai society. Most Thai people respect the King and his ideas.

On the one hand, the border people legitimize their livelihood, which is of high quality and acceptable. On the other hand, the EGAT was discredited by

ordinary people. In this regard, *Pi Somjit* spoke in front of the Sub-committee, referring to the King's theory of sufficiency economy as follows:

The King said that the villagers should have a way of life based on sufficiency economy or agriculture production. I would like to ask the EGAT (*karn fai fah*) why are you greedy (*mai roojak por*)! Now, we have sufficient lives. We have fish, we have gardening, we have enough rice, we have everything. Even though we do not have much money, we can feed ourselves. Why do you come to destroy us? If you move us, we will lose everything.

In summary, the border people have attempted to communicate to Thai people and the government that they are local people who have been subjected to Thai state. They have protected the state boundary and kept national security at the Thai-Burmese border. As I have shown they related their livelihoods to national security; the more wealthy they are, the more secure the Thai state is.

5.2.2 Remembering Community History

Hill tribes considered that they have no nationality, even though they were born and have lived in Thailand. They had no sense of patriotism and did not cherish the land where they lived. Therefore, it was difficult to find the loyalty of the Thai nation in their mind. Their mind was set on the emptiness, no trust in institution they love and cherish. However, as a result of government agencies coming to develop hill tribes for over 30 years, as well as the King always visiting hill tribes in the North resulted in hill tribes feeling tie to Thai nation. The monarchy in particular seems to be the institution that hill tribes know and have the most connection.

(Kachadpai 1990: 129-30, *my translation*)

“We are eggs, but the government is stone”

Moh Yupin, a Karen elder (February 14th, 2010)

The first part of the first quote by Kachadpai Burusapatana, an ex-Secretary General of the National Security Council, is a good example of the radical government authorities' narrative, showing how the majority viewed the minorities. They understood that the minorities or hill tribes are different from Thais in terms of economy, society, polity, religion, language, and tradition. Hill tribes with various differences were categorized to be non-Thai. The majority also viewed them as uneducated, unhealthy, and poor. The effect of this was that the Communists easily persuaded the minorities to join them (Kachadpai 1990: 129). The second part of his quote shows how the majority incorporated the minorities into the Thai national community. However, the border people (as minorities and hill tribes at the same time) narrated their stories in very differently from the first part of Kachadpai's quote, but similarly to the second part of the quote. Their village histories reflect how the Karens perceive themselves and place themselves in relation to Thai state, which is quite different from the government authorities' viewpoint.

I elaborate two stories of Saw Mying Dong and Muang Mean villages. The first story from Saw Mying Dong tells how the village was founded and describes its role and position in the past under Thai administrative system. It indicates that their village is on Thai territory and long history. In the second story from Muang Mean, the villagers referred to the King visiting their village in 1970s. It implies that Karens remain loyal to the King, and the village is under the Thai state's control and protection.

1. Saw Myin Dong: Ancient Community

It is very challenging for the border people to have to deal with power development projects, particularly the Salween dams. As *Moh Yupin*, a Karen elder of Saw Myin Dong village put it, "I cannot be against the dam, but I myself disagree with dam construction. We are the eggs, and government is stone. The eggs break when they hit the stone. When the stone hits the eggs, the eggs are broken too. Hence, we will break down if we confront government for sure." For this woman, compared to the government, the villagers are powerless. The only thing she can do to deal with dam projects is to pray to God for His mercy. The villagers believe that God is the one who makes the decision and can confirm whether dam will be built or

not. “If dam is built, it means God allowed dam builders to achieve,” said *Moh Yupin*. Nowadays, villagers keep praying to God in the church, asking Him to stop the Salween dam projects.

What I understood from *Moh Yupin*’s thoughts is that she imagined that the Thai government should be a protector that would prevent any danger or harm from coming to her village because the border people belong to and are subjects of the Thai state. This is the underlying message in what she said. Correspondingly, the village representatives presented their community history as part of the Thai state.

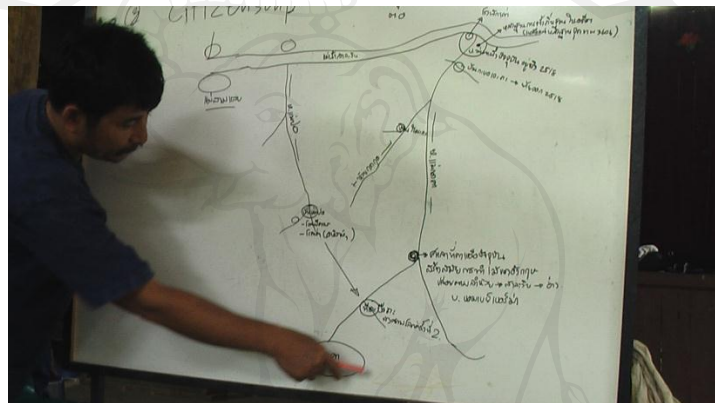


Figure 5.2 Hand-Drawn Map: “We have lived around this area”

In July 2009, *Ai Chamnan* presented the village history using a hand-drawn map. He explained that Karens moved often around this area before coming to Saw Mying Dong. They escaped diseases like smallpox and cholera.⁵ They came to this area to plant paddy rice and do some gardening. At that time, the English came here and Bombay Burmah Company got forest concession and cut down the teak trees. The company floated all the logs down the Salween River and sold them in the city. After that, the villagers moved to another place, but it was too far for children to walk to school. So as to stay nearby their fields, they moved back to Mying Dong again in 1975 and have been there ever since.

Ai Chamnan’s presentation implies that they have stayed in the Thai-Burmese border zones for a long time, even though in the past they moved around to many places. They also claimed that their ancestors established the village over hundred

⁵ In the past, they practiced animism. Such diseases or unusual events were interpreted as the result of an attack by bad spirits.

years ago. In the past, this area was a trading area among people who traveled along the Salween River. It was part of the trade route between Mae Sariang in Thailand and Papun Township in Burma, which is 30-40 kilometers away from this village. Since Saw Myin Dong is a provincial village to guard Thai subjects from Burmese enemies, the government set up a police station above the village on the hillside. Later on, the police station was moved to another place, beside the Salween riverbank south of the village. Ai Chawalit said that his grandfather was the first person to work at the first police station in 1903. Twenty years later, the police station was torn down and moved to the second place due to several reasons, including fears of ghosts, danger from wild animals, and difficulty in getting water from the stream. In 1985, the second police station moved to another village close to town. Nowadays, the very first police station area has become the border soldier camp (*than thaharn phran*) and the old wooden-ruined building of the second police station is under the protection of the Fine Arts Department in the Ministry of Culture.

Since 2007, archeological research in the border areas has been conducted by a team of archeologists led by Dr. Rasmi Shoocongdej, an archeologist of Silpakorn University. Dr. Rasmi and staff members did an excavation on the east side of the Salween River and found archeological evidence such as earthenware from *Lanna* (Northern Thai) in the mountainous areas. They excavated a skeleton in a river branch of the Salween River. The age of the skeleton was determined to be between 12,000 and 13,000 years old. Inhabited by diverse communities, the Salween areas were believed to be important routes of travel in Indochina region.

One of the main research sites is the area in Saw Myin Dong village. The excavation study in Saw Myin Dong village, located nearby the Salween River, found much archaeological evidence, including ceramics, pipe components, and stirrup polished stone tools. They are dated back to pre-historical and historical periods in the 20th-22nd Buddhist centuries. Ai Chawalit told me, “One meter under the ground there were some old artifacts that indicated that there were people living here as early as 1,500 years ago. At that time people didn’t have knives and metal like we do now. They used stones for tools and weapons.” This confirmed that there were many communities that have stayed along the Salween River and river branches for thousands of years. This area is meaningful in terms of the history of humanity. It is

intimately associated with the history of the surrounding communities. These archaeological data suggested that the Salween River is a key piece of Thai history. This area is the meeting point of other Asian countries such as China, Burma, and Malaysia. It is deplorable that these clues to civilization might be lost as a result of the Salween dams (Pitsanu 2006).

Those artifacts were included in the village history, told by the villagers to outsiders. Through archeological excavation and research, villagers came to know that the place they live has an ancient history. They had also found some archeological artifacts, but they did not know what they meant. Since then, they have learned from the professionals the importance of those archeological artifacts, and the archeologists and the villagers agreed to set up the museum in the community. Some archeological artifacts and information were put in the museum. This museum is used by the spokesmen to explain the history of community to the outsiders who visit the village. "Some artifacts are at the community center. This is early part of history that made it possible for us to be here today," *Ai Chawalit* explained. In addition, in terms of public learning, the findings of the archeological study were included in a book published by an NGO network in Northern Thailand.

Appropriating the archeological information, the villagers strategically legitimate themselves as the successors of the past; they are always introducing their place as having a long history and their village as a very old village. This information became their means to gain legitimacy and power, as it points to the fact that they have stayed in this area for a long time and also that the village area belongs to Thai state. Knowledge about their place is recovered and created. They have internalized this knowledge and shaped the way they look at the place. This knowledge of their place has become an instrument for the local people to use against or to deal with Thai state.

2. *Muang Mean*: the King's Community

In June 2010, students from the Center for River Training discussed *Muan Mean*'s history with two of the village's residents, *Pi Somjit* and *Ai Kai*. The students asked why Karen ancestors moved to this area. *Pi Somjit* replied proudly,

Before, they had lived in the forest in groups of three or four houses far away from each other. The King of Thailand came to visit this area, and he suggested that everybody move together to form one large village here on the Salween. People agreed that this was a good idea, so they came together like this. After all the people moved together, the government sought to build school and public health office. However, a few families on the Burmese side still lived spread throughout the deep forest, not like on Thai side where people are collected into villages.

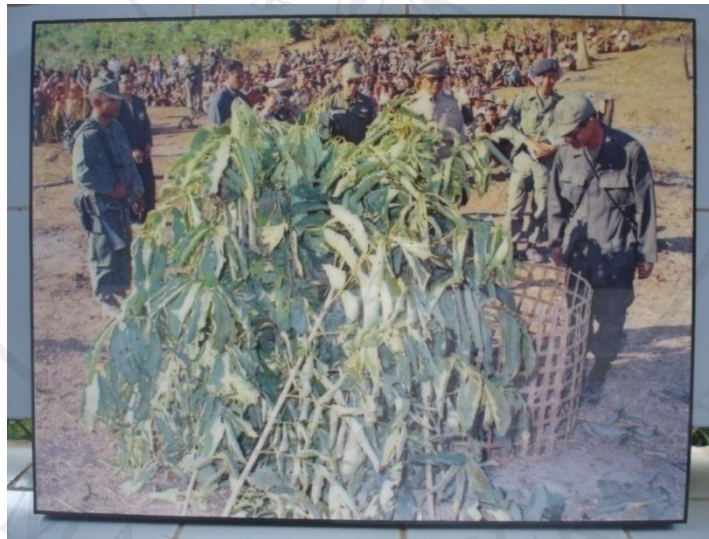


Figure 5.3 The King Bhumibol (Rama IX) visited the village in 1970s

The villagers referred to the early period of the village and mentioned the King's visit over 30 years ago, which identified the villagers as the King's subjects. In the 1960s, Thailand had faced invasion of communism along its border. Government authorities were extremely concerned about the issue of maintaining border security, which they saw as a way to maintain national security and integrity. To protect border security, the government took several steps, including increasing border surveillance, conducting community development programs, establishing Border Patrol Police camps and schools, and facilitating visits by members of the royal family to marginalized border communities. The Queen and King visited many

places nearby the border, including Muang Mean village, when they were young. They visited the village on February 26th, 1973. The King wore a soldier uniform during his visit to the village. *Ai Kai* said, “It was my father’s time. At that time, the King did many good things for the village – a lot of developments, like allocating land to the people and everything.”

The villagers had been told by the old Karens that there was a peacock couple courting in the forest. The peacock, for Karens, signified goodness, virtue, and nobility, which referred to the Queen and King. The villagers try to claim that their community is a Thai village and to identify themselves as the King’s subjects rather than migrants or aliens from different nation. Referring to the King’s visits in the past lets border villages like Muang Mean narrate their own history being as located in Thai territory and subjects of the Thai King. This argument makes sense for Thais and implies that the border people want the Thai state to recognize and look after them.

To sum up, as I have shown, members of those two villages have used their own histories to represent that they are local people in order to negotiate with the Thai state agencies at the Thai-Burmese border. In this vein, they may get opportunities to access government services and natural resources as members of the state, having livelihoods on the border.

5.2.3 Defining Security Space: Between Three Parties

While the political conflict was taking place, the government tried to take advantage of the situation or insecurity to exploit the borderlands. However, the people who live along this border (as individuals and communities) have used security discourse on their terms to negotiate with the different agencies of the state. Sometimes, at the level of individual negotiation, they have to compromise for the sake of their own benefits and safety. For example, to make a living on the Salween River as a boat driver is a highly risky endeavor for a small return. *Ai Boon* is currently a leader of the Shan group in Bon Bea Luang village. He is a boat driver on the Salween and he also runs a small grocery. But the boat is his main source of income. In February 2010, he said that there were some problems related to security in the Salween border areas. People who travel to Karen villages on the Burma side

must be careful. Sometimes Burmese soldiers shoot at the boat. He was scared to drive his boat when he heard news about the Burmese shooting boats. Villagers from the southern and northern stretches of the Salween River tell pass stories to each other when they hear news of bad situation. He did not drive his boat for tourists. “For example,” *Ai Boon* said, “they shot at a boat in Auda area, I drove the boat up to Mae Sa Kerb village, but I didn’t go further than that. The soldiers are special. After they negotiated and everything was alright, I felt safe to drive the boat up to the north.”

Ai Boon had a lived experience of the serious situation on the Salween River and had come face to face with the military, which had the power to shoot at him. There was no security of his life. He said that it happened a long time ago. The Burmese soldiers called him to stop the boat. He stopped and they asked him to buy commodities for them. “Sometimes,” *Ai Boon* said, “they wrote what they wanted in a piece of paper and gave some money. The money was not enough to buy what they wanted. For example, the commodities they told me to buy were worth 1,000 baht, but they only provided 500 baht. I had to take it. I would not play hard with them. I am scared of them. So, I compromised with them.” Since then, he has felt a little bit afraid of the Burmese soldiers whenever he drives his boat and comes across them. But the Thai and Karen soldiers do not cause problems for him.

Regarding the Salween dams proposed to be built that will have disastrous impacts on environment and community, villagers have tried to position the village as a security zone to deal with authorities at the border. *Ai Chawalit*, a village representative of Saw Myin Dong, said, “The River has no standard of security and there is no security for dam construction. One day, the people in this village will not be the only one facing floods. Other villages in the security zone will face problems as well. It is problematic because the River does not have a clear boundary line. Thus, who can profit from this River must be people who are quite wealthy and powerful.”

For the border people, who are concerned with dam impacts, security discourse is a tool for negotiation. The term “security zone” (or the security discourse of the villagers) is used to explain their perception of the Thai government’s legitimate power over territorial security, which also includes the implication that

local people have the right to stay on their land with secure livelihoods. As Ai Chawalit said,

I am worried about the dams. If there are problems, especially insecurity in every stage of construction, the government must confront this problem first. I think that the insecurity problem should not necessarily be confronted only with regards to specific affected villages by flood. For security reasons, maybe this should include villages that are not affected by flood too.

Security at the border holds a different meaning to the government than it does to the border people. For the government, security at the border means clear boundary and territorial power. The government officers are assigned to protect state territory using military operations as a fence for the state. On the other hand, the villagers re-define security in their own ways. They create a specific meaning of security as peaceful zone.

Even though the conflict situation prevails, the border people maintain cross-border communication and friendship. On February 14th, 2010, Chati, a Community Development Center volunteer, and I had a talk with *Noh Sida*, a 41-year-old-Karen of Saw Myin Dong. *Noh Sida* told us that Karens in Burma crossed the Salween River to exchange foods and materials in the village. She said that in the last two months there were 30 Burmese Karens, both men and women, who came to buy food and salt in the village. They also brought some forest products and their own agricultural products, such as chili, for sale and exchange. The important food stuff that they needed to buy was salt and shrimp paste. They can survive if they have it. Other things might be too heavy to carry. Then everything they bought was taken into the boat and someone has to carry on everything to the village for many hours.

“I was surprised that a lot of them came into the village secretly. They were ordinary people who came from many villages. It is difficult to find a store in their homes,” said *Noh Sida*.

There was no fighting at that time, which was a good chance for them to come and buy everything they needed. *Noh Sida* sympathizes with them because they are

poor, some of them do not have sufficient clothing. Nevertheless, she does not talk to them when they come. They usually come three times a year. They came two times last year, and this year they came only one time.

Noh Sida pointed her finger to the south, towards a village and said, “Sometimes they came this way. They came from the camp and took the boat up here.”

Chati added, “They are Karens. Their soldier camp is in the south. The Burmese soldier’s camp is to the north.” Because of the location of the Burmese soldiers, they cannot go to Bon Bea Luang to buy goods. Saw Myin Dong village is only one place where the Karens from that area can come to get what they need.

Noh Sida understood that the Karens get help from KNU troops, who guard them while they cross the River to her village in secret, without the Thai soldiers’ knowledge. In answer to my question about KNU soldiers guarding the Karens during their travel, *Noh Sida* replied, “Maybe! The Thai soldiers didn’t know. Otherwise the Karens could not come here. The Burmese soldiers also didn’t know this.”

In this case, however, it makes sense that both the Thai military and the KNU have coordinators. As the village representative, *Ai Chawalit* said, “To ensure their travel to Thailand, they need KNU troops to guard them and secure their passage to Thailand, and before crossing the River the KNU coordinated with the Thai military to get permission.”

Ai Chawalit has played an important role in strengthening security for the village. Creating secure space is one of his strategies in order to gain negotiation power for the entire village with different governments and authorities. In February 2010, I facilitated a discussion with the villagers in Saw Myin Dong village based on my observations on movements led by people along the Salween River. We discussed topics ranging from their livelihoods, their challenges, and the strategies they use overcome the challenges they face as border people. The village representative shared his strategy aimed towards creating a secure space for the Salween River, as the River does not belong to a single body, but it is owned by the community.

The different strategies deployed by Saw Myin Dong village show their approaches in designing of the meaning of security. According to the village leader,

in order to create a secure space for the village, one must keep in mind these core methods: keeping clear goals, showing modest actions, maintaining a willingness to adapt and being flexible in dynamic situations. *Ai Chawalit* compared himself to one character in a role play. He said that his coming back to the village and working in a leadership position is like playing one character. He runs back and forth and he seems to be the most outstanding character. He works with the best of his ability, but actually it is not only his energy. There are different people in power to support and advise him on various issues. If problems happen in a specific area, it is his responsibility to consult with the people in power. “The village is not abandoned. If we are concerned about the problematic issues and we are determined to solve the problem, there are people in different stages who will support us and cooperate with us. If we do not solve the problem today, we do not know what will happen. In the meantime, friends, partners, relatives and networks are essential in solving the problems,” said *Ai Chawalit*.

Not only is he determined and willing to solve these problems, but he has used his strong character and decision making ability to help his community overcome challenges. His understanding of the context of the local area also helps him to lead. “Sometimes, when there is problem, although we have rules here, the government authority cannot reach their assistance to the community level. As I have committed to work in this position, I have to be decisive. I must solve problems at hand (*kaekhai hetkarn chapohna*),” said *Ai Chawalit*.

Ai Chawalit had to think of what ability he has and how to lead. In Saw Myin Dong village, there are many different problems. “Government officers come here to work as part of their duty and they stay here temporarily, but we live here as our livelihood. The problem is deep for villagers,” *Ai Chawalit* explained. Sometimes, they are circumscribed when they propose solutions to higher level. Therefore, they need to solve problems and coordinate for solutions in the appropriate ways because there are various problems.”

As a child, *Ai Chawalit* was sent to attend school in a nearby town in Mae Sariang District. After he finished school education, as a Thai citizen, he became a *thaharn kain* (drafted soldier) for two years. After his discharge, he worked as temporary laborer in the Salween National Park. He was able to apply this

background experience and connections with the government authorities and civil society networks in order to negotiate to define his village as a secure zone. *Ai Chawalit* explained, “There are different groups surrounding our village. If we cannot reach each group and we don’t know people in high positions of each group, such as Karen and Burmese soldiers, it will be difficult to coordinate. So, we have to find ways to reach to people in positions of power. At present, we try to use this policy and try to talk and coordinate with them by asking these groups not to create problems in Salween area.”

The villagers of Saw Myin Dong have cooperated with government bodies in Thailand, such as the Salween National Park office and the border military. During the time I was staying in the village, I saw a team of Salween National Park officers who had come to the village to meet the village head. Their purpose was to discuss how to protect the forest areas with the villagers. I got a chance to ask a national park officer about his opinion on the Salween dams. He said that if the dams are built, it will affect the forest conservation area as well.

There was also a military training for security volunteers while I was staying in the village. Thai border soldiers trained men from the village on border security. The military trainers came from outside for this specific training and stayed in the village temporarily. The village accepted some policies from the government bodies and applied it in accordance with the village policy. Following the gun fire event involving the Burmese soldier, a meeting between the head of Saw Myin Dong village, Karen soldiers, and Burmese soldiers was held, and they agreed that the guns were fired by the Burmese soldiers (as I was told by villagers that earlier before I arrived Saw Myin Dong).

One day later, after the day Manee and Sowan met the Burmese soldier, they conducted an interview with *Ai Chawalit*. Before they met him, they agreed that they should also tell him that they met and talked with the Burmese soldier. This is because they wanted to know his opinion about their talking with the Burmese soldier. They also wanted to show their sincerity to him as this issue was related to the village relationship with the Burmese soldiers. Because of this, they didn’t want to ruin or cause problems for the village in any way that related to security along the border.

They were surprised to learn that *Ai Chawalit* already knew that they met with the Burmese soldier because a Lieutenant had told him in a meeting the day before.

Because he was in the middle of all the parties, *Ai Chawalit* organized the meetings between representatives of the KNU and the Thai soldiers and separately, between the Burmese soldiers and the Thai soldiers to discuss transportation security for people in the Salween River area. The meeting with the Karen and Burmese soldiers happened on the same day and around the same time that Manee and Sowon had a meeting with the Burmese soldier who had come to buy goods in the Saw Myin Dong village shop. Sowon asked, “Can you tell me about coordinating methods used in the Salween area? I have recently heard the villagers say that there were some conflicts at the Thai-Burmese border and these have caused a sense of insecurity among the villagers.”

Ai Chawalit replied, “I request both Burmese and Karen soldiers not to create problems in the border area. If problems go on in this area, many groups will be affected.”

Villagers, for him, are helping the governments to protect natural resources and trading on the Thai-Burmese border and so they need security on both sides. However, *Ai Chawalit* emphasized that he could only tell them certain things; many other things he could not share with them. For example, he did not tell them exactly where the meeting took place because it was a confidential matter. He explained it this way:

Yesterday I talked to them (the Karen soldiers and the Burmese soldiers separately) and we negotiated an understanding. They accepted it. I don't intervene in the political affairs of any group, because I'm not a politician. I told them, ‘from now on, I ask you to do whatever you do in your country’... I told also them, ‘we want you to coordinate with us when problems happen’... This morning, I also made a trip to investigate the gunfire event, but it was not clear... That side (Burma) also did not admit to any gunfire... I told them, ‘If there is any circumstance that means we cannot stay in our village, please inform us

so that the villagers will be prepared for evacuation from the village'... I cannot tell you all the details of the meeting.”

His strategy in negotiating with different authorities to create secure space is to reach out to powerful people in each group and organize a discussion to clarify rules specific to the Salween border area.

Opening a secure area in Saw Myin Dong village allows, with specific conditions, Burmese soldiers to come and buy commodities in the village. It also opens an opportunity for the villagers to expand a closer friendship with the Burmese soldiers, while at the same time the villagers are really playing roles among different power players in Thailand. *Ai Chawalit* insisted that in the past, he did not allow the Burmese soldiers to cross into the village area. But since the Thai military began its international relationship policy among soldiers, they coordinated with the Burmese soldiers on military affairs. He eventually accepted this policy and applied it to the village. *Ai Chawalit* explained:

People sometimes need to buy commodities. We are familiar with and see each other on both sides of the River. We are sincere and have nothing to hide. If we had not accepted the military policy, it would have seemed like we were hiding ourselves too much. So if we let this policy operate in our village, it may be a channel through which we can negotiate about problems that sometime happen in this area. However, it was not my idea or the villagers' to implement this policy. It is the Thai soldiers' idea, and I have to take action to apply it in realistic and appropriate ways.

In the past, Bon Bea Luang was the only open area for soldiers from Burma to enter Thailand. Later on, a unit of Thai Border Soldiers coordinated the issue and allowed the Burmese soldiers and people on Burma side to come in. However, sometimes the villagers find this worrisome because some of them are not familiar

with the soldiers. *Ai Chawalit* explained that because he is in a position to take care of village, this is an affair of the government that he has to accept. “However,” said *Ai Chawalit*, “I am able to create my own rules within the policy. For example, I set a regulation that we only allow Burmese soldiers to come to our village to buy commodities twice a week.” He appointed two persons who would do the task of picking the soldiers up when they want to buy commodities and then sending them back after they finish their business. It is necessary to take good care of them because the villagers do not want them make any problems for them. That is the management system in village level.

Ai Chawalit further explained, that, if Burmese soldiers call and there is no one at all to pick them up, it can cause anger, which impacts their security. He thought about it hard, but there is no way out. “It is international issue and we are a part of it. So this is how we deal for the sake of our security. I personally try to create mutual understanding with each army group when they change troops in the village... We don’t let them go into the village and we don’t go to their side. It is not like in Bon Bea Luang village,” said *Ai Chawalit*.

Of course, to work in this position he cannot do it alone. He needs to have a network to work with in order to organize people to protect their home. The villagers have to look after each other. Every month they have a meeting to encourage the villagers to love the village with zeal. *Ai Chawalit* concluded, “Previously, I was a village resident. I was too used to living in an individual manner. Therefore, I have to use techniques to supplement villagers. Perhaps I’m a little advantaged in terms of knowledge. I then supplement this technique by being conscious for a villager or a team, because people are diverse in their likes and dislikes.”

Therefore, the villagers are flexible and operate in complex ways to protect their rights. At the community level, they create space to negotiate with authorities on both sides of the border in identifying secure space to protect their livelihoods in the ways that support the potential of the government, protect natural resources, and stimulate trading at the border of Thailand and Burma. This is the way they have tried to secure their livelihoods at the Thai-Burmese border.

In summary, when dealing with the capitalist market and state powers at the Thai-Burmese border, the border people have constructed an identity as local people

and created a negotiated space through in which social memory consists of history and inheritance. The role of the frontier defenses or border guards is a Karen legacy that has been reinvented in order to deal with the capitalist market and the state's frontier capitalization in the contemporary neo-liberal period. The villagers of Saw Myin Dong tell of their history as local Karen, a group which has lived in the area for a century. They refer to the original frontier village, the police stations and old artifacts in order to claim that they are frontier defenses and are subjects of the Thai state. The villagers of Muang Mean meanwhile tell of the early stages of their community, as a border village in Thai territory and of becoming subjects of the King. In addition, when dealing with violence and danger as part of their everyday lives, and to protect their livelihoods, these border communities have had to define a secure space in negotiations with the ethnic Karen insurgents, the Burmese troops and the Thai authorities.

5.3 Cultural Lore as Contested Space

Prophecy Symbolism: "A huge fishing net across the Salween River, the River will be full with bones."

Ai Kai, a resident of Muang Mean (June 29th, 2010)

According to Tsing, conflicts over natural resource management are related to culture. This is what she calls "cultural mobilization" (Tsing 1999: 6-7). Cultural mobilization, for Tsing, refers to the process of re-assembling a way of life or a set of practices, knowledge, legacies, values, and organizational forms in the midst of challenges. In this manner, the people at the Thai-Burmese border relate livelihood to identity in order to contest the commodification of their natural resources by the capital market in collaboration with the states. Through commodification of the Salween River, the border people are being reduced to invisible people with imperceptible naked lives: they are nobodies in commodity production when they lost livelihoods. However, they have tried to make their lives visible in the light of identity construction. The border people not only use history and inheritance as social memory to construct their identity, but also cultural lore. This section explores how

the border people use cultural lore to construct their identity as cultural space to negotiate with capitalist market and state. In other words, symbolic contestation constitutes their struggle over access to natural resources (Moore 1993: 381).

The Karens in the Salween borderlands share ethnic ties both across and within the state boundary. However, they are separated by the Burmese and Thai states into Burmese Karens and Thai Karens. The Thai and Burmese states have built their modern national policies upon this ethnic distinction. Despite being descendants from common ancestors, the two groups formed their national consciousnesses differently (Keyes 1994). In effect, the KNU has claimed political independence for the Karen State for six decades, but the mission of the KNU is inadequate to persuade Thai Karens to support their nationalist movement. Likewise, I found that most of Thai Karens specifically mentioned that they are not part of the KNU and that they are not involved with the nationalist movement in Burma. *Ai Srithong*, for instance, said that villagers do not often visit their relatives who live currently live inside Burma because they are scared of the Burmese military and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) troops. In the past, they traveled safely when the KNU controlled these areas. But at the time of research, some of these areas were under siege and controlled by Burmese soldiers in association with the DKBA. Furthermore, they fear that the Thai authorities might think they have joined either the KNU or the DKBA if they keep traveling to visit someone in Burma. However, they try to keep in touch with their relatives in Burma. Villagers on the Thai side intended to be uninvolved with the political conflict between the KNU forces and the Burmese military in Karen State.

Even though the Thai Karens do not support the Burmese Karen's nationalist movement directly, they do support Burmese Karen's environmental movement based on culture and biodiversity. In particular, they support the movement against the Salween dam projects. Thai Karens and Burmese Karens have collaborated in protesting the Salween dam projects, claiming that they were defending their common Karen culture and ecosystem. Such a movement does not involve direct political conflict, but it is being part of the politics of ethnicity, in terms of ethnic identity and the environment. The border people recognize the fact that the Salween River is a state boundary. However, the Karens on both sides of the River claimed that they are

brothers and sisters who share some common culture and natural resources. In September 2010, I met Yao, a Thai Karen Activist in Chiang Mai city. He has worked on environmental and cultural issues in the Thai-Burmese border area to support the border people in protesting against the Salween dams. Yao insisted, “We don’t get involved with the politics of Karen nation-building. They keep their own political struggle. If they are successful, they will have a Karen nation. But we work on culture issues. We perceive that in the Salween borderlands, culture and biodiversity could be preserved. Such culture and biodiversity are beyond state boundaries. We share them altogether. The environmental movement emphasizes the connection between culture and natural resources, which is not involved with the ethnic politics in Burma. So, the environmental movement is separated from the Karen nationalist movement.”

Even though they are divided by a modern state boundary that caused them to face different political situations, they would share some of the same problems if the natural resources on which they depend on are devastated by the construction of the dams. This common concern brings them together in their struggle and to reconstruct some common platform, particularly border identity, via cultural lore. In my field survey, I found that among them, there are many who are full of hope in their life that and who related the idea of locality and homeland. Border people, particularly Karens, perceive and understand the environment surrounding them through *Hta* (traditional songs or poems) and folktale, reflecting their knowledge about nature and place (Prasert 2007). The issue of the villagers’ imaginations and how they think of Salween areas, including the River, came out during a discussion with the villagers. There are many beliefs about the Salween River which have made their way into poetry and have been passed on from generation to generation.

One of the villagers told a story explaining the origin of three rivers. Te Yaw, a local Karen activist, said that the Karen elders of Saw Myin Dong and Muang Mean village told him the story. The elders have already passed away. The story is about three siblings; an oldest brother is the Mekong River, a younger sister is the Yangtze

River, and a youngest sister is the Salween River.⁶ The Mekong and Salween Rivers flow down through Thailand, but the Yangtze River flows another way into China.

However, the Yangtze River was not referred to in any part of the story. As Ai Chamnan told it, *There were two siblings, an older brother and a younger sister, who stayed on the mountain. They had never seen the sea. They told each other that they would have a trip to see the sea together. Next day, when the sister went out, the brother asked a loris to be his friend and help to bring him down to the sea. They travelled slowly. When the wind blew, they went faster. Then they travelled slowly again when there was no wind.*

The brother can be compared to the Mekong River. Some parts of the Mekong River flow slowly, some parts flow quickly. On the other hand, the sister is the Salween River: *The sister came back home in the evening. She did not see her brother at home, and she wondered where her brother was. Then she saw her brother's track away from the house. She was very angry that her brother had not been honest. Then, she saw a cobra and asked it to bring her to the sea. She was very angry and swore not to ever meet her brother again forever. The cobra brought her down very quickly.*

Some parts of the Salween River are sharp curves.

They crawled until they reached a point (where it formed the Thai-Burmese border now) where ants bit at the cobra waist. The cobra suddenly recoiled with a shudder.

This point is called “Kho Ke” (Salween curve) upstream of the Weigyi area.

After its pain released, the cobra crawled straight on to the sea and they arrived at the sea. The loris and the older brother arrived at the sea later.

Thus, the Mekong River is longer than the Salween River.

⁶ They also identify the sex of rivers. The Salween River is a woman. Ai Kai said, “*It flows from the sacred mountain shape like woman's vagina. She has a period, blood come out every month and flow down.*” The Salween River became red color that it occurs in April every year. The villagers also talked about seven underground streams from that mountain flow into the Salween and those are sacred streams, especially one is very sacred and pure. If you drink that, you will get very goodness.”

Pi Somjit also told me another story. Her words: “Someone at the shelter has a dream that a man and a woman have married at the confluence of Moei River and the Salween River. The man has a ring and the woman has a flower in her hands. It was interpreted that the man means Moei River and the woman means the Salween River. The River will eat people at this confluence. Drowning accident happen and people die every year. There is a case this year (in 2010). He was Karen from Burma. Last year there were two cases, one man and a child.”

This story explains the geographical characteristics of the rivers that might have been told before the arrival of modern state. The Karens had explained that both the Salween River and Mekong River are of the same origin and flow down in different directions to meet the sea. A plot of the story transcends boundary of states which indicates that they, at least in the past, did not link the rivers to state-boundaries. Their imagination of river is not involved with political boundaries. This is clearer in another story: the story of *Pha Su Kae*.

The folktale of *Pha Su Kae* was written in the book of Salween studies published by the NGOs' network and campaign (Montree and Landharima 2007). I have also heard this story from villagers to whom I have spoken. They have traditionally used this story to explain what the dam and its impact would be in their imagination. Ai Chamnan told the story.

There were seven comrades who had special characteristics. Mae Lo Lor had a big and tall body. Pha Lae Na had big ears. Pha Su Kae had a powerful and strong body. Doh Na De had a big nose. Tor Jue had long hands. Ko Noh Meah had a body hotter than fire. Khue Nor Tee had body cooler than water. They wanted to catch silver and golden fish. At the confluence of the Moei River and the Salween River, Pha Su Kae saw that the Salween River was not flowing in the right direction. Normally the river flows from the north to the south, but the Salween River was flowing to the west. The river, here, was not too deep and there were some stones. So, they thought they would divert the River to the Moei River to the south and they would catch silver fish and golden fish later. They planned that, at the beginning, Mae Lo Lor would use his big and tall body as a foundation pile by standing in the river. Next, Pha Lae Na would use his big ears to block the river and Pha Su Kae would use his powerful body to push stones over in order to change the direction of the River. At the same time, Doh Na De would go to the south direction and use his nose to entrap fish. Tor Jue would also use his long hands to catch fish. If it got too hot while they were working, Khue Nor Tee would use his cool body to cool down the weather. If anywhere got too cold, Ko Noh Mea would use his body hotter than fire to warm them. Then they started to work, resting the foundation pile on the ground river, big ears blocking, stones blocking, making a sai (fish trap). Pha Lae Na was hurt by a big stone when Pha Su Kae dropped it over him. The villagers watched

them when they were blocking the river. They thought that blocking the river was not a good thing. Pha Su Kae and his friends should let the river flow naturally, they thought. Villagers tried various tricks to stop Pha Su Kae from what he was doing. They said, 'Pha Su Kae you should stop right now, your child is dead.' But Pha Su Kae said, 'Oh! Never mind. I can get a new child.' The villagers said, 'your wife dead.' Pha Su Kae still did not care and told them that he could get a new wife. So, he continued to block the river for a long time. Trying for the last time, the villagers said, 'your mother is dead.' Pha Su Kae thought, 'Oh! I have only one mother and could not get new mother. So, he stopped working and quickly went back home. It was true that his mother was dead. When Pha Su Kae arrived home, his mother's corpse was already buried. He was very sad and he prayed and made a merit to his mother. He stayed at home to work, and he did not go back to block the river again. His friends also went back to their homes. Before they went back, they left their marks right there.

Silver and golden fish were at Ke Doh Koh (the Hatgyi area). A nose-shaped mountain is at Kamamai village downstream of the Hatgyi area in Burma. There is a foundation pile-shaped stones located southward of the Moei River's mouth. Pha Su Kae's mark is called "Kachor Wka Le" (white elephant cave) located near the confluence of the Moei River and the Salween River.

When I visited Ai Kai in June 2010, he told a similar version, referring to the elephant. He said, *Pha Su Kae caught a lot of fish; but not the golden and silver fish. He ate them, and then he filled the river with the fish bone. A river guardian (not the villagers), came up from the river wanted to stop him. When he realized that he should go back home to see his mother who was going to die, then he rode an elephant to go home. But the elephant walked very slowly. He was angry and cursed it, turning it to stone resting on emerald.*

He pointed to the highest mountain located opposite side of the Muang Mean village inside Burma.

This *Pha Su Kae* folktale has been told widely and in many different ways in Karen communities along the Salween River. It reflects their imagination of the Salween River. The Karens' folklore can also relate to the current situation along the Salween River, including to the Salween dams. For example, Ai Chamnan also

interpreted the story of Pha Su Kae in relation to the modern dam building and the roles of seven comrades. “To block the river, machinery and material are used. Tractors mean Pha Su Kae, backhoes mean Tor Jue, the foundation pile means Mae Lo Lor, the dam site means Pha Lae Na, welding steel means Ko Noh Mea, making cold cement or concrete means Khue Nor Tee,” said Ai Chamnan. He also identified silver and golden fish as silver, gold and jewels that are abundant under the ground on mountains and rivers. Ai Chamnan added, “They (capitalists) want to exploit those resources.”

Furthermore, the Karens’ ancestors made a prophecy long ago that predicted: *There is going to be a big war that will end right here, and there will be a huge fishing net across the Salween River. The net is going to be full with bones at the end of that war. A hornbill will also defecate while flying across the river.* At the time, Ai Kai’s interpretation of this prophecy is that the big fishing net across the river is the Salween dam that stands across the river. The hornbill is war plane which is flying over the river to war. The reason for the bones is because the Karen people opposed the dams, the Burmese military will kill every single Karen, and the dam will be full of their bones. It will become a violent situation on the Thai-Burmese border, especially as more and more countries become involved. They think that it will be the end of Karens.

In addition, there are many ethnic groups in the Salween borderlands, and the names of ethnic groups do not represent them all in the movement. To make alliances among different ethnic groups, the common term used is ‘Salween people’. It refers to the people who live along the Salween River and its tributaries. It does not matter which ethnic group they belong to: they are the border people who share the same Salween River. Both sides share the same river together. The Salween River flows through many countries, Tibet, China, Burma, and Thailand, and many ethnic groups along the River benefit from it. Many people said in interviews that it is an international river. Therefore, it does not belong to anyone. No one exactly knows who the real owner of the River is, but there are many people who share the River. For example, Ai Srithong, the Karen man, explained that the river owners are the people from place to place: the River belongs to villagers of Muang Mean when it flows pass Muang Mean village, and it belongs to villagers of Bon Bea Luang when it

flows pass Bon Bea Luang village. “It means that everyone can use it. It does not belong to only one,” said Ai Srithong. This is quite similar to the Shan woman, Nongnut’s, explanation. “The Salween River belongs to all of us. Everyone has right to use it. Thus, we are not divided and we should take care of it altogether,” said Nongnut.

In short, the topography of the Salween and Mekong Rivers, connected to the origin stories of the three rivers, covers parts of China (Tibet and Yunnan), Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. According to the story, *Pha Su Kae* and friends created the places of local uniqueness that the Karens believe tie them together. Those folktales tie their lives to the Salween River and represent actual terrestrial space extending beyond the Thai-Burmese state boundary; thus the Karens cannot be easily separated from the space or each other. Those unique places (referred to in *Pha Su Kae*) together form a local topography that extends beyond national boundaries that the Karens understand as their memoirs.⁷ Their perception of the cultural space – transmitted through their oral stories – indicates that the unit of cultural space is conceivable in relation to local stories. In addition, cultural space facilitates their protests against the construction of the Salween dams. In other words, their lives have been tied together through gathering people and empowering them to fight against the oppression of frontier capitalization, through sharing Salween folktales and prophecies. Beyond the Karens and their folk tales, another cultural distinction of the Salween borderlands is its mix of ethnic groups living there. This mix of ethnic groups is part of the border identity. The border people’s identity as the Salween people encompasses all ethnic groups at the Thai-Burmese border, and the border people themselves do not perceive that the Salween River separates them from the people on the other side.

To sum up, if life can be compared to a journey, it cuts across many boundaries, such as state boundaries and ethnic boundaries, and as I have shown, the Salween border people have tried to transcend these boundaries. The Karens have formed alliances among their own group within and across the state boundaries, using

⁷ Advocacy NGOs mapped those places from story of *Pha Su Kae*, including other place from other stories (cf. Montree and Landharima 2007: 75-81), as new element on modern map that correspond to the earth’s surface. Those folktales were transferred to be a modern map of places.

cultural lore and ethnic ties. At the same time, they have created coalitions across ethnic boundaries by creating their own collective identity as Salween people who feel rooted in and who use or share the same common river – the Salween. In this sense, they have created their border identity in relation to the place where they live and share intimate experiences.

5.4 Summary

The Thai and Burmese states are practicing the re-territorialization of state control over natural resources at the Salween borderlands, as transnational dam investors propose Salween dam projects as part of the commodification of the River. Through the re-territorialization of state control and the commodification of the Salween borderlands, so the capitalist market and state have expropriated the border people's property and resource access. As these processes have excluded the border people from the Salween resources, so their livelihoods have been threatened, and if they lose their livelihoods, they will lose sight of exactly who they are. Therefore, the threat to their border livelihoods will lead to the problem of contested meanings in relation to their identity.

Hydro-electricity as a commodity has a 'socio-nature' in which people become invisible, so that the Salween borderlands are empty land, and the border people are both excluded from their local resources and dehumanized as "imperceptible naked lives"; they have become invisible people who live naked lives. However, the border people have attempted to negotiate with the capitalist market and state agents through the production of space and a sense of belonging. This space is comprised of physical, social and cultural spaces, which they have used to compete with the capitalist market and the state to gain access to the Salween borderlands. As a physical space, the border people have turned the Salween borderland, both the forests and rivers, into their livelihoods, and it is through the contested meanings of the forests and fish that the Salween borderlands have become contested spaces. The Salween River and its forests have become sites of resistance, as social spaces that the border people have used to develop their sense of self-identification and to defend their lives and livelihood security. Furthermore, livelihoods and identity are related, and in terms of cultural space, the border people have sought to express their lives, to

be visible. They, and in particular the Karens, also share a common culture, with ethnic ties spanning state boundaries and with shared resource-based livelihoods. Social memory, local history and cultural lore have been used to shape their sense of belonging and form their border identity, which in itself is related to their sense of 'belonging'. They perceive themselves as "the Salween people," who live in the Salween borderlands and intimately experience the Salween River on a daily basis. As there are different ethnic groups living around the Salween borderland, then in order to form alliances across ethnic ties and state boundaries, the border people have not used ethnicity but instead their shared sense of belonging in order to construct a border identity; to defend their territories and secure their livelihoods.

Furthermore, the border people construct the border identity not only through social memory, local history, and cultural lore, but also through the movement against the Salween dam construction projects. In an interconnected world, they have attempted to redefine their livelihoods within the anti-Salween dam campaign. Since the struggle of border people extends beyond the Salween borderlands, in the next chapter I will explore the border people's practices of redefining livelihoods in the context of a transnational world.