Safe migration and the politics of brokered safety in Southeast Asia

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Chapter 1

Introducing safe migration

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1   Introducing safe migration

> The "global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration" will seek to enhance international cooperation in governing migration and focus attention on migrants, the people they leave behind and the communities they join. It will aim to protect the vulnerable; leverage the many benefits migrants bring to their host and home countries; and tackle the drivers of irregular and forced migration.
>
> *(António Guterres, Secretary General,*
> *The United Nations (2017))*

The schoolyard buzzes with students passing time whilst waiting for their classes. Some of them sit chatting while others read their textbooks. Many are preoccupied with their smartphones, which have become a ubiquitous accessory amongst the students. Others help themselves with food in the canteen. There must be at least a few hundred students in the schoolyard area. For a passer-by, the school could be mistaken for an ordinary Thai school; yet, *Myanmar Migration School* is entirely made up of young adult labour migrants from the greater Bangkok area. Despite the school's lack of official credentialisation, the Sunday school emulates the formal Thai education system including compulsory school uniforms which includes the school's name and logo. As such, Myanmar Migrant School is highly public.

   While I walk towards the canteen area, I notice a video screen displaying old speeches by Aung Sang, the revered Burmese National Independence Leader. By chance, today is "Burmese Martyrs' day," an auspicious occasion on Myanmar's official calendar. The School Director, *U Ba Sein,* whom I have met several times before, spots me and comes over. He explains to me how the school operates. He tells me that language training is central, not only for students to master Thai but also to "build national and labour discipline." Our conversation is brief as the next sessions of classes begin in a few minutes. U Ba Sein grabs a microphone and gives a short speech in remembrance of Aung San, the great independence leader of Myanmar. The students stand up in silence whilst U Ba Sein speaks. The address ends. Chatter refills the schoolyard. Classes in the rooms upstairs recommence.

U Ba Sein takes me around to some of the classrooms to introduce me and my "safe migration" research to the students. Rather than any conversation about labour migration assistance, he continues the theme from the schoolyard downstairs. After a short monologue regarding the importance of national unity and democracy in Myanmar, he asks the students "who are the famous leaders of the Shan, who are the famous leaders of the Karen?." He then explains to the students that I was a researcher interested in "safe migration" and wanted to learn about students' migration and work conditions. Later on, outside the classroom, U Ba Sein tells me that it is important to build national and political identity of the students. "In order to have national solidarity" he says, "you must have labour solidarity." As I would learn over time, for U Ba Sein, the welfare and work conditions of labour migrants were inseparable from Myanmar politics; a disposition which made sense given U Ba Sein's long-term residence in Thailand as a political refugee in the aftermath of Myanmar's 1988 student protests. As several other Myanmar political exiles in Thailand, the fate of labour migrants had become an additional topic of concern over the years.

His preoccupation with national and labour solidarity may seem disconnected from "safe migration." Yet, his school was an extended arm of a large "safe migration" programme, funded by international aid. With the school's relatively large enrolment of nearly a thousand predominately Myanmar students (and a handful of Khmer and Lao labour migrants), the school had potential as a conduit for aid programmes that target labour migrants. Through donor funding, the school had a status as a "migrant resource centre" (MRC).

MRCs have become a common ingredient amongst several aid organisations that implement safe migration interventions and other forms of migrant assistance. Nominally, an MRC serves as a focal point where labour migrants can seek advice relating to migration status (passport and work permit policies) and assistance with lodging complaints relating to underpayment, work accidents, and abuse. Although the language school's formal role appeared to be an odd fit, the classrooms served as an entry point for awareness raising for labour migrants. The school's potential as a conduit to labour migrants was also significantly amplified by the ubiquitous use of social media amongst the students. Despite the school being highly localised (in spatial terms – a school), its social and spatial reach straddled well beyond the schoolyard through Facebook and other social media platforms. The school's own Facebook account had more than 12,000 followers (as later chapters will show this is a tiny following compared to other migrant assistance groups) where a range of migration-related media content could be shared (such as information on new visa regulations, etc.). Furthermore, language training made sense as a safe migration intervention given the importance of language acquisition in order to obtain better employment thereby pre-empting poor work conditions, and – importantly – equipping migrants with skills to seek help if needed. The Migration School is one

out of numerous examples of safe migration initiatives scattered throughout Thailand and its neighbouring countries.

Brokered safety

This book examines *safe migration* – migrant assistance that comprises pre-emptive and protective measures to enhance labour migrants' work conditions and well-being – which has become an emergent aid modality in the Mekong region and elsewhere. The school visit I describe foreshadows the multifaceted ways in which safe migration interventions unfold. The language school serves as a central component within a supply chain of international aid assistance, glossed in policy terms as safe migration interventions. At the same time, the school indicates how "safe migration" goes beyond a narrow focus on "legal" and regulated migration. Ultimately, language training is more important than training on labour rights at the Myanmar Migrant School. As U Ba Sein himself told me, "you may be legal but still not happy," hinting at the commonality of underpayment and abuse in his students' workplaces regardless of their legal status.

At the same time, the school denotes how aid interventions become (re) appropriated and altered through implementation. Despite the school serving as an MRC under the auspices of a "safe migration" intervention, any programme jargon is overshadowed by a Burmese-specific discourse that marries labour migration with Burmese political futures and pan-ethnic solidarity. This is not to say that the school ignored its role as an MRC. Language training was after all recognised by the donor as the main activity that took place. The classrooms were often used as a social space where students' migration-related problems could be expressed. Yet, it was evident from conversations with both U Ba Sein and several of his students that despite a specific focus on labour rights and migrants' well-being, there were obvious limitations to how the school and students alike could affect meaningful change. For example, the same day of my visit I spoke to *Ma Ni*, who is one of the students at Myanmar Migrant School. She had left her employer due to underpayment, she told me, but as Thai law required the employer's written consent to let her change jobs, it had put her in an impossible limbo regarding her migration status. Other students faced the same problem in spatial form: students possessing "pink cards" – a semi-formal work permit that is commonplace in the Thai labour economy – were technically in breach of their visa condition when crossing provincial boundaries. Ironically, although the school was part of a safe migration programme, some students exposed themselves to risk when attending training sessions on safety as their place of employment and residence were located elsewhere. U Ba Sein told me on a later occasion that he had several cases over the years where students had been arrested due to these legal arrangements.

Yet, it was precisely document status and labour rights empowerment where donors wanted to see more work done. But, this was problematic for

the school. Pushing students can backfire, U Ba Sein alleged, pointing to how other migrant groups had encouraged pseudo-union activism amongst migrants which only resulted in the migrants getting in trouble with the authorities. As one of the teachers told me, the main value of the school for the students was how it helped them indirectly with changing employers which allowed better pay and conditions, despite the aforementioned implications this had for legal status. Rather than training on labour rights, it was the mere fact of obtaining better language skills that was meaningful for students, the teacher alleged.

The tension between the school and its international funder reflected different perspectives on how safe migration is achieved. Whereas the school favoured language training, the international agency held mixed views. From the point of view of an aid evaluation, language training under the auspices of a safe migration intervention can be both applauded and critiqued. Teaching Thai (and English) made sense as it constituted a proactive form of assistance: language skills empower migrants to avoid exploitation in the first place. As such, it produces "safety." Indeed, unpublished studies pointed to the fact that students ended up with better paid jobs after attending the school, which was echoed in my own interviews with several students.

Yet, such results may just as well reflect students social disposition acquired over time in Thailand. As one expatriate aid official familiar with the project pointed out to me: "language is not really the point." From an aid programme's perspective, how can you attribute causational linkage between improved language skills and better labour outcomes? These concerns make good sense within an aid monitoring and evaluation habitus. As mentioned above, language training had limited direct effect on the various structural problems' students faced relating to work permits and visa status. Furthermore, most students had already been in Thailand for several years before enrolment and could hardly be considered representative of inexperienced, vulnerable labour migrants. In this sense, the school arguably manufactured "success" as the students are pre-dispositioned to succeed given their accumulated migration experience (a phenomenon that we will return to throughout the book, see also Huijsmans 2012a).

Still, my ethnographic sensibilities made me curious why some aid officials questioned language training as a "successful" safe migration initiative. To my knowledge, the school was the only activity under the auspices of safe migration where beneficiaries paid – through tuition fees – to access the service. The simple fact that poor labour migrants, by their own volition, chose to spend the only day they have time off to attend a language school indicated that – at least from the point of view of the students – the school certainly had value *for them*. With enrolments fluctuating between 800 and 1200 students, and the school being in its 10th year of operation it seemed curious how the intervention received less attention from the safe migration sector. In contrast, some safe migration programmes lauded

other MRCs that worked directly on compensation claims for migrants as a "success" (ILO 2012), despite the fact that practitioners were well aware that a court-ruling did by no means guarantee enforcement of a compensation claim. Hence, the school foreshadows the importance of ethnographic attention to how safe migration outcomes are both contested and mobilised along different scales of aid delivery, a theme that will be examined throughout the chapters.

The book's ethnographic focus also means adopting a sideway glance (Hannerz 2003), that is, embracing an astute interest in the wider context of the social milieu one observes. What falls outside an aid programme's vision and formal practice becomes crucial. During fieldwork, important side effects of the school's operation became apparent which was to my knowledge invisible in aid reports and possibly to several aid workers within the safe migration aid sector in Thailand. The awareness raising which took place in the classroom produced its own counter-intentional effects. U Ba Sein was quite open with me that awareness raising on legal and safe migration "also provides opportunities for brokering practices." Several students took on the role as informal brokers due to their newfound knowledge on visa processing, Thai labour law and other handy tips for labour migrants. "Work permits," U Ba Sein said, "brokers can eat from that one!" Although a central tenet of safe migration discourse proclaims that informing migrants on legal migration pathways contributes to eradicating migrant brokers, the school's safe migration activities had multiplex effects: while the awareness raising benefitted students in navigating their migration, the school was at the same time – even according to their own director – a broker-incubator. This may seem both self-defeating and tragicomic yet point to a broader claim this book makes: what appears as mutually exclusive oppositional principles, practices, and actors within formal safe migration aid delivery are intertwined and co-dependent in practice. Assistance and harm, safety and risk, the legal and extra-legal, and eradication and production are not opposites but part of the same configuration.

As our introductory ethnographic vignette demonstrates, the school is riddled with paradoxes where opposites are brought together: the school's simultaneous overt and covertness (despite operating publicly with a license and school uniforms, many students nonetheless must tacitly navigate precarious migration status to access the school); the local and immediate versus the distant and abstract (how programme implementation appropriates its own local style in contrast with the aid discourse which funds it); frictions between formal assistance and informal needs and values (what is valuable for recipients is questioned within a monitoring and evaluation aid framework); and, finally, how safe migration interventions end up producing one of the very phenomena it seeks to eliminate: brokers. Hence, this book is an ethnography of how safe migration comes into being through various practices by governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and local community-based initiatives – such as the

Myanmar Migrant School. The book traces the emergence of safe migration, why certain aid actors gravitate towards the concept, as well as how the concept moves from the discursive and abstract (how it is verbalised) to the social and material (how it is practiced). More specifically, the book argues that:

1 Despite a nominal adherence to procedural rule-bound migration governance, safe migration instrumentalisation depends on, and produces informal practices. Just as the school's formal safe migration interventions piggybacks on localised Myanmar-specific idioms of national identity, formal awareness raising produce (as opposed to eliminate) informal brokers – a phenomenon which official safe migration discourse wishes to eliminate.

2 *Yet, such informal practices are not extrinsic to governmental structures but constitutive of them.* Hence, safe migration brings together oppositional actors into a range of forms of co-dependency, either through patron-client relationships or brokering practices. Government bodies, NGOs, brokers and other safe migration actors co-opt and become co-opted through these relations.

3 Just as actors are both oppositional and co-dependent, safe migration interventions furnish divergent outcomes where assistance, help, exploitation, and abuse are co-produced. As following chapters will show, although safe migration assistance in the form of migrant hotlines, pre-departure training to formal documentation of workers is tremendously useful for migrants, they are also central to creating new forms of social control, either through deportations, or forms of bondage. Rather than safety, freedom, empowerment, exploitation, and abuse being opposites, they are co-produced.

Hence, safe migration in the Mekong region, the book argues, is best understood as *brokered safety*. Furthermore, the ways in which formal safe migration interventions depend on oppositional yet co-dependent informal practices cannot be understood without careful attention to their temporal and spatial significance. Safe migration interventions relativise social space and connectivity: informal practices, despite being highly localised, have larger spatial reach compared with "high tech" abstracted approaches (such as donor-driven mobile phone apps). At the same time, safe migration interventions produce spatial and temporal reversals. As coming chapters will delineate, safe migration outcomes often precede intervention, or are premised on spatial "U-turns" (e.g. pre-departure training taking place *subsequent* to arrival in the destination country). Throughout the book, the theoretical implications of this dimension of spatio-temporal governance will be fleshed out.

The Mekong region is an ideal place to investigate safe migration, not only due to its enormous labour migration pool but also how safety and

risk are central to the region's migration and development trajectories and rationales:

> The ethos of entrepreneurialism relies on people taking a chance, on people taking risks. This premise is fundamental to the sensibilities sweeping through the region. Yet at the same time, millions of development dollars go into supposedly mitigating unwanted consequences, based on a pre-emptive logic of "measure, avoid and/or compensate." There is a very basic tension here. On the one hand, people are encouraged to try their hand in market engagement in freeform ways one cannot anticipate and, on the other hand, we work with a logic that suggests we can anticipate and take care of undesired consequences before they happen despite the fact that aspirational endeavours are premised on their unpredictability.
>
> *(Lyttleton 2014, 9–10)*

As such, a belief in socially engineered safety goes to the heart of policy thinking relating to both labour migration and development in the region. To be clear, the book's central concern is not what aid organisations and policy officials intuitively ask (does safe migration work?) but rather *how* it works (see Mosse 2005b). Within UN agencies and NGOs, their internal institutional logic shapes knowledge production. They see the social milieu in which they operate through the eyes of their prescribed objectives and mandates that are geared towards orchestrated change. This predisposes aid actors to easily confuse prescription (how things ought to be) with description (Neumann 2017). As such, aid documents and evaluation reports tell us more about the implementers and less about the social reality they seek to transform. In order to appreciate how the policy concept safe migration mobilises institutional practices, it is necessary to move beyond the formal self-definition of policy. As will become evident throughout this book, social practices that operate beneath the surface of formal policy implementation are central in order to grasp how safe migration comes into being, hence the need for an ethnographic approach. Before expanding on the book's methodological approaches, it is necessary to introduce the concept itself.

Safe migration: The concept

"What is safe migration?" Nick, a senior expatriate aid official within a large aid organisation, repeats to himself the question I just asked. "Well, it is migration that is safe." Throughout my research, I would often hear responses like this. The concept seems so simple yet ends up as a tautology which renders it devoid of meaning. As later chapters will show, aid officials who work for safe migration programmes often struggle immensely with even explaining the concept to themselves. Yet, when pressed, practitioners

will commonly allude to four central characteristics which can be summarised as follows.

First, safe migration includes programmes and policies which seek to legalise labour migration. Enabling migrant workers to obtain passport, necessary visas, work permits, and associated formalised entitlements (such as health insurance) are considered a central pillar within safe migration. As such, safe migration is nothing new, given several decades of various guest worker and circular migrations schemes worldwide (Feldman 2011a; Skeldon 2012). Yet, as many practitioners are quick to point out, legal migration status does not necessarily equate with safety for migrants as employers may subjugate migrant workers by withholding their passports or subject them to other abusive practices (de Genova 2007; Suravoranon et al. 2017). Furthermore, it is notable that despite a seeming state-centrism given its focus on legal documents, safe migration has had considerable input from humanitarian and development actors with a "pro-migration" philosophy. Hence, safe migration embraces and critiques legal migration.

Second, safe migration includes what may be referred to as progressive awareness raising. Whereas early anti-trafficking programmes (to be explored in the next chapter) could at times take on a strong anti-immigration tone where "staying where you are" (Thatun and Marshall 2005, 46–63) became an extended form of border control and migration prevention, safe migration turns this on its head. I witnessed this change myself when I worked on anti-trafficking programmes for the UN in the early 2000s where the UN theme group on human trafficking in Laos gradually moved from a focus on "don't' go" to "go safely." Hence, realising that villagers will migrate no matter what governments and UN agencies may say or do, it is more feasible to support this process.

Beyond focusing on travel documents, implementers of safe migration awareness raising commonly emphasise the kinds of relationships that are central for migration outcomes, exemplified in safe migration training manuals:

> Do you know anyone who lives in the town to which you are going? Do you have that person's phone number?.. Are you travelling with friends?… Do you know anyone who has been hired through this person or a recruiter before?… Do you know an organisation or person to contact in the other town/country – if something goes wrong and you need help and safety?
>
> *(World Vision 2014, 11–14)*

Such questions come to the fore within pre-migration interventions, which in effect expands migration facilitation beyond the legal material (travel documents and work permits) to the social: interrelations become the key to migration safety. Hence, in addition to legal documents and awareness

raising, calibrating the right kind of social capital is a third important element in safe migration discourse.

Finally, safe migration also takes the shape of a counter network: as migrants move through space, a range of support services within source communities, during transit and in destination points, are meant to act as focal points where migrants can seek assistance. As later chapters will show, this may take the form of hotlines, outreach services, social media or – as alluded to at the beginning – in the form of MRCs.

All these elements are usually framed in terms of vague notions of a well-regulated migration system, which is why safe migration is commonly mentioned alongside kin phrases, such as "well-managed," "ordered," or "regular" migration. As will be delineated in the next chapter, despite less media attention compared with global anxieties relating to human trafficking and modern slavery, safe migration has emerged as a central migration governance discourse in recent years. As foreshadowed by the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, the UN accentuates safety as a central policy focus through its *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)* (United Nations 2018). Relatedly, the UN underscores the importance of safe migration through its Sustainable Development Goals which includes "[facilitating] orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well- managed migration policies." (United Nations 2015, 27)

As alluded to above, important temporal (progressive awareness raising *before* departure) and spatial connotations (assisting migrants as they move *through* space) are central to safe migration governance. The theoretical significance of them is worth spelling out.

Safe migration: Theoretical deliberations

At first glance, safe migration is grounded in migrants' lifeworlds. However, the term's main impetus is rather different. Safe migration emanates from NGOs and UN agencies, many of them being anti-trafficking programmes, which work on migration assistance. Hence, safe migration points to instrumentalisation. Just as humanitarianism constitutes a discourse of how one may act upon human suffering (as opposed to human suffering in itself, see Fassin 2011a), a starting point for any exposition of safe migration must recognise it as a discourse of orchestrated change. The concern is not in what ways "safe migration" may reflect migrant practices as such; rather, how a range of agencies may operationalise safe migration through programmes and practices. Hence, the concept primarily exists as a technocratic discourse within aid agencies that work with migrant labourers. Theoretically, this takes us to a broader question regarding the relationship between epistemology (how knowledge is produced) and governance (strategies and techniques for subjection and objectification). Two theoretical strands have particular relevance in this regard: the mobilities turn and

post-panopticism, which both have important spatio-temporal implications for how we understand safe migration interventions.

In recent years, social scientists have given increasing attention to mobility. Although a range of mobile phenomena, such as migration, are not new, there are important changes in the way mobility is theorised. One of the most prominent scholars in this field is John Urry. In his book *Mobilities* (Urry 2007), he argues that not only is there empirical evidence of increasing mobility in the world (such as the intensity of travel); mobility is also about epistemological and ontological change. Traditional social science, Urry argues, is premised on "container models," where social phenomena are construed as taking part within territorial units. This has resulted in mobility being treated as a "black box" (Urry 2007, 12) and thereby received less analytical attention. Moving beyond static and sedentary modes of theorising, the mobilities turn takes mobility as a point of departure for academic inquiry. As such, mobility is not merely an empirical object which ought to be given more attention, it transforms the social sciences. Mobility invites us to revisit epistemological foundations of knowledge production.

Bærenholdt usefully extends this line of inquiry by considering how mobility is linked to governmentality. Whereas Urry invites us to consider mobility as subject – and not merely object – of knowledge, Bærenholdt argues that mobility in today's world extends beyond being an object to become an instrument of governance. In other words, "government and governmentality do not only deal and cope with mobility; they work *through* mobility." (Bærenholdt 2013, 27). Travel documents (such as passports) are prime examples of this governing principle, neatly recapitulated by Keshavarz:

> Another factor that makes passports special compared to other material techniques of border control is their actual mobility due to their configuration. Compared to the majority of border techniques, which are technically fixed and bound to the geographical location of the border, passports are conceived to be mobile, to be carried. (2011, 7)

In short, mobilities enable us to think about mobility and migration as subject of politics and knowledge. In this context, is it useful to consider another theoretical line of inquiry: *post-panopticism*.

Post-panopticism stems from Foucault's influential work on disciplinary power. This body of work has been explicated *ad nauseum* and does not need to be repeated here. Panopticism applicability to contemporaneous societies has been subject to considerable debate amongst several scholars (Boyne 2000; Gane 2012; Lyon et al. 2012). Contemporary societies, some argue, are not premised on a disciplinary power as discussed in Foucault's seminal *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Ranging from the works of Zygmund Bauman on *Liquid Modernity* (Bauman 2000) to Deleuze and Guattari exposition of *assemblages* (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), governance, they argue (in different ways), is not premised on hierarchical, diagrammatic

modes of surveillance (as implied by the panoptical model) but polymorphous networks, or seduction rather than discipline. We have, it is argued, entered an era of *post-panopticism*.

Post-panopticism has taken several different lines of inquiry. However, there are two inter-related areas of analysis that are of particular relevance to this book. First, post-panopticism implies a critique of static, sedentary ways of both theorising and governing, pointing to a territorial understanding of power where discipline becomes a function of demarcated configuration of space. Similarly, to mobilities scholarship, post-panopticism attempts to break away from social theorising premising on "container models." Second, post-panopticism denotes a move away from discipline to control and security. In *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari (1988) point to how government resembles rhizomatic, de-territorialised networks. Rather than social control of bodies through discipline, mass media and information technology become the basis for modulation. Deleuze explicates the distinction thus:

> The different internments or spaces of enclosure through which the individual passes are independent variables: each time one is supposed to start from zero, and although a common language for all these places exists, it is analogical. On the other hand, the different control mechanisms are inseparable variations, forming a system of variable geometry the language of which is numerical (which doesn't necessarily mean binary). Enclosures are moulds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.
>
> *(Deleuze 2006, 4)*

In this sense, control replaces territorialised, disciplinary surveillance with modulation that can be thought of as a system of coding and sorting. This departure from territorialised disciplinary power is also evident within the later writings of Foucault. In *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault 2007), he expands on his former analyses of sovereign and disciplinary power. *Security*, Foucault argues, becomes evident from the 18th Century onwards in part due to increasing complexity of town life. Rather than government being premised on enclosure, *circulation* becomes a new mode of organising social space. In contrast with discipline, which is premised on surveillance of elements within a territorial unit, security is open-ended. Here, it is worth quoting Foucault at some length:

> … the town will not be conceived or planned according to a static perception that would ensure the perfection of the function there and then, but will open onto a future that is not exactly controllable, not precisely measured or measurable, and a good town plan takes into account

precisely what might happen. In short, I think we can speak here of a technique that is basically organised by reference to the problem of security, that is to say, at bottom, to the problem of the series. An indefinite series of mobile elements: circulation, x number of carts, x number of passers-by, x number of thieves, x number of miasmas, and so on. An indefinite series of events that will occur: so many boats will berth, so many carts will arrive, and so on. And equally an indefinite series of accumulating units: how many inhabitants, how many houses, and so on. I think the management of these series that, because they are open series can only be controlled by an estimate of probabilities, is pretty much the essential characteristic of the mechanism of security.

(Foucault 2007, 35)

The temporal dimension is significant. Whereas disciplinary power produces subjects through its effects within an enclosed territorial unit, security produces subjectivities *in advance*. It is important to note that this is not new. Both medicine (diagnosis, disease control) and insurance (risk) are examples of how anticipation becomes the premise for assessing regimes of intervention (Boyne 2000; Lakoff 2010). We may call this *technologies of the probable*. Several post-structuralist scholars, such as Jean Baudrillard, have shown how such technologies often take the form of simulation. David Lyon neatly encapsulates Baudrillard's position thus:

In the disciplinary machine, verification precedes judgment. Although it aims to produce automatic obedience, panoptic surveillance nonetheless reacts to events—it notices, identifies and categorizes them before passing this information on to authorities that determine its ultimate significance. In control societies, however, judgment is far more proactive. The simulation model structures the event's production and meaning, and passes judgment in advance. Surveillance is relegated to a secondary function and is only there to monitor the performance of the model.

(Lyon et al. 2012, 7)

As later chapters reveal, safe migration interventions – such as pre-departure training – embody both simulation (which sometimes includes role-play) and coding (work and travel documents become a labelling system for calibrating migration outcomes). Hence, safe migration constitutes an important empirical case study which dovetails several of the characteristics which both the mobilities turn and post-panopticism allude to. As safe migration is about enabling safety in migration (as opposed to anchoring it), the policy task becomes how to govern migrants as they move through space as opposed to being confined by it.

In later chapters, we will explore hotlines and the use of social media (alluded at the beginning of this chapter) as central components of

migrant assistance. Clearly, this points de-territorial modes of governance. Furthermore, as safety is premised on pre-emption, interventions need to precede action. The aforementioned language training and awareness raising are examples of this form of intervention, and we will explore several other safe migration interventions premised on a pre-emptive temporal logic in coming chapters.

This is not to say that anticipatory modes of governance necessarily replace disciplinary, territorialised power. As will become evident, the two governmental logics can operate in tandem, such as pre-departure training which both attempts to "mould" a particular migrant subjectivity (often within the territorial, bounded space of a training centre) and forestall risk in migration (which can even include simulation in the form of role play). Yet, programme objectives and intent are geared towards enabling mobility as opposed to domesticate migration. It is precisely the intersection between the static and de-territorial which becomes both analytically and empirically important for analysis. Whereas the aforementioned examples are premised on an expectational logic (i.e. social engineering takes place in *advance*), safe migration responses are also gauged in terms of counter-networks of protection. De-territorial interventions – such as hotlines – are meant to assist migrants once they experience various types of difficulties during their labour migration. Here, safety is construed *post hoc*; they are reactive responses to events which have already occurred. Yet, as will become evident, ability to react is intimately tied up with what has preceded and what actors have been connected.

This connects to a broader analytical point regarding safety itself. The concept has become an omnipresent concern in contemporaneous societies, ranging from regulation of the workplace (occupational health and safety), child raising practices (ranging from manufacturing standards of toys to crime prevention), transport (e.g. accreditation, insurance, and legal liabilities), and even warfare (minimising casualties of armed personnel). Yet, analytical attention to safety is largely neglected in the social sciences, perhaps in part due to the simple fact that "safety is defined and measured more by its absence than by its presence" (Silbey 2009, 368). In the modern era, safety has emerged as a central concern in the context of the advent of industrialisation and the nation state, where the regulation of labour and capital (industry, workplace regulations) and large-scale industrial disasters (e.g. Chernobyl) have been central catalysts. In this context, two analytical points can be made. First, concerns with safety are frequently instrumentalist and reductionist. As Silbey argues:

> Although invocation of safety culture seems to recognize and acknowledge systemic processes and effects, it is often conceptualized to be measurable and malleable in terms of the attitudes and behaviours of individual actors.
>
> *(Silbey 2009, 343)*

As later chapters will show there are important political stakes in how safe migration practice attempts to navigate between inducing systemic safeguards and neoliberal notions of (individuated) responsibility in labour migration. Second, safety underscores the aforementioned temporal significance of migration governance: safety can only be engendered in advance. Its organising logic is premised on expectancy. As such, this book contributes to filling a crucial gap in explicating how safety makes and is made of policy practices. Furthermore, safe migration as a contemporaneous policy formation raises important questions of how governance relates to temporality and space. Yet, how governance materialises in specific contexts cannot merely be deduced from policy logics but must be subject to careful empirical investigation. As this book will demonstrate, the spatio-temporal logics of migration governance must be understood in light of a myriad of mediated practices which straddle different actors and policy domains.

Such mediated practices take us in turn to our final theoretical construct: brokers and brokering. In the following chapters, a lot will be said about this, both empirically and analytically. For now, I will merely foreshadow how brokers (Burmese: *boisa*; Thai and Lao: *nai na*) are central to connecting and mediating separate social realms, which may include spatial (such as transporting migrants across international borders), institutional (connecting migrants with authorities in order to obtain documents, or submit a work accident claim), or moral realms (how both material and symbolic profit ensues from brokering practices). It is precisely these qualities which make brokerage a central problematisation within safe migration discourse (e.g. the morally dubious status of brokers as possible risk for migrants), yet helps explain why safe migration programmes themselves become depended on (and even produce) both brokers and brokering practices, often without safe migration programmes themselves being aware of it.

The research

The book is based on ongoing fieldwork in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar over an seven-year time period (2013–2019), which is part of one of the world's largest hubs for precarious, low-skilled labour migration (Martin, Erni, and Yue 2019). The research sprung out of my earlier research on anti-trafficking interventions along the Lao-Thai border (Molland 2012b). Over the years, I noticed how several individuals and organisations within the antitrafficking community in the Mekong region would appropriate and utilise the term "safe migration" in their work. My exposure to safe migration predates my academic work on migration in the Mekong region, when I worked as an advisor for one of the Mekong region's first regional UN trafficking projects. Alongside "human trafficking" and "modern slavery," safe migration was emerging as yet another "buzzword" in the aid sector. Whereas scholarly attention has generated considerable mileage in relation to trafficking and

modern slavery (Gallagher 2017; Kempadoo et al. 2015; Kotiswaran 2017; O'Connell Davidson 2015; Stoyanova 2017), academic interrogation of safe migration is to this day nearly non-existent (for exceptions, see Bylander 2019; Huijsmans 2014; Kiss and Zimmerman 2019; Molland 2012a). Safe migration was to me low-hanging fruit which was waiting to be studied. The harvest is this book.

Methodologically, my fieldwork has been based on what I have elsewhere labelled "tandem ethnography" (Molland 2013), that is oscillating methodology between the domain of policy one seeks to investigate and the social world which the policy domain attempts to objectify. This involves interrogating the discursive characteristics of safe migration, coupled with tracing how it becomes operationalised through practices. As such, the research follows multi-sited ethnographic research, which has by now become a conventional way of conducing ethnographic research. The exact locales I ended up investigating dependent on where various organisations implemented their activities. As will become evident, parts of the research itself are not primarily defined by geographical specificity as some interventions have de-territorial qualities (such as the use of social media). The large bulk of this research was carried out in the greater Bangkok region but with several trips to both many parts of the Lao-Thai border, as well as several visits to Myanmar and Laos. This includes accompanying aid programmes' safe migration awareness raising within migrant source communities and safe migration interventions at border checkpoints; examining migrant hotlines and the virtual world of migration assistance; and shadowing how NGOs process work compensation claims and employment disputes. It also encompasses visiting the numerous language training centres and outreach services provided by MRCs; investigating the regulatory environment and conduct of recruitment agencies; as well as in-depth interviews with ubiquitous brokers along supply chains of migration assistance. As such, this book is in methodological terms just as much a study of institutional practices – by "studying through" their operational logics (Wedel et al. 2005, 40) – as an investigation of migration and aid.

In initial stages, my fieldwork centred on Lao migration to Thailand, given my pre-existing research focus on these two countries. Yet, over time, it became clear that despite several organisations claiming to include a focus on Lao migrants in their programmes, actual programme implementation amongst the Lao was either limited or non-existent. In effect, studying Lao-based safe migration activities became a study of nothingness (a conundrum we will consider in later chapters). In contrast, through my hunt for Lao safe migration activities, it became clear that migration assistance relating to Myanmar migrants was ubiquitous. In glaring contrast to Lao project activities, there are numerous organisations working amongst Myanmar migrants, a reality that was simply too dominant to ignore. A generous grant from the Australian Research Council (awarded in 2015) allowed me

to considerably expand my research to include a focus on both Lao and Myanmar migrants. Indeed, contrasting these two groups comparably is crucial in order to understand how safe migration is mobilised, a topic to be explored in the next chapters. Why not studying the Khmer – the third main labour migration group in Thailand – one may ask? The answer is simple and pragmatic: given the intensity of ethnographic approaches adding a focus on Khmer-related safe migration would spread the research too thin. Although the research did engage with some Khmer-related migration assistance, I simply have not had scope to include a Khmer-specific focus in this study.

The multi-sited nature of the research has necessitated the deployment of several research assistants. As such, my approach echoes Fredrik Barth's seminal multi-sited ethnography on Bali sociality where one "[can] not rely on data from one or a few locales only, as it [is] precisely the transferability of understandings from one situation to another" (Barth 1993, 22) that is central to examining variation across scale. Although I speak some Lao and Thai, research assistants were needed in order to cover the multilingual environment I was operating in (Lao, Thai, Burmese, Mon, Pa'O, Shan). Throughout my research, I collaborated with two trilingual research assistants in Thailand (with Thai, Lao English and Thai, Burmese, English language capacities.) I also collaborated with research assistants during visits to Laos and Myanmar. All research assistants had a combination of postgraduate training in the social sciences or considerable experience with applied research and programme implementation relating to migration assistance. My two research assistants in Thailand also carried out directed data collection during my absence during teaching semesters at my University.

During fieldwork, we spoke with, interviewed, observed, and interacted with numerous actors relating to safe migration and migration assistance, including donors, government agencies, international and local NGOs, migrant self-help groups, brokers, and migrants. More specifically this includes five UN agencies, more than a dozen government bodies, and more than thirty NGOs and migrant assistance groups. More than eighty individuals from these bodies have been interviewed with different levels of intensity. Several of them allowed me to also accompany and observe activities during implementation. In addition, more than a hundred migrants were involved in interviews or informal conversations relating to their migration experiences. Throughout this book, pseudonyms are used for both individuals and organisations, except in cases where their identities are on the public record. In some cases, I have also provided pseudonyms of places and altered details pertaining to certain events.

Readers familiar with the Mekong region may notice that although I have a great deal to say regarding the contrasts between Lao and Myanmar migrants (see Chapter 3), I only peripherally detail the multi-ethnic dimensions of Lao and Myanmar migrants. Although ethnicity may have

important bearings on the social organisation of migrants in Thailand (in part due to political and armed conflict in Myanmar), I was unable to penetrate this level of granular detail throughout fieldwork. Although some of the migrant assistance groups I have studied were based on ethnicity, many other groups were pan-ethnic and based on other organising principles (e.g. migrants joining associations based on dormitory residence proximity). Hence, throughout the book, I refer to nationality (i.e. Myanmar and Lao migrants) as opposed to ethnic identity, except a few cases where this is pertinent to the analysis. Throughout the book, I interchangeably refer to both Myanmar and Burma as there is no established consensus on proper usage of the country's name. Hence, referring to "Burmese migrants" implies nationality as opposed to the ethnic label *Bamar*, unless specified.

   Although the research did engage migrants, it is important to point out that this book is not a study of labour migrants per se. As such, the book builds on current anthropological work on migration in that it places focus on migration infrastructure. What is of concern is not why migrants move but what actors (and non-actors) move migrants (Lin et al. 2017). Extending this line of inquiry, a study of safe migration management then does not ask what makes migrants safe but how safe migration makes migrants.

The book

The book comprises three parts. Part 1 *Situating Safety in Migration* examines the ascendancy of safe migration and the various reasons why donors, UN agencies, NGOs and other actors have warmed to the concept. In addition to situating safe migration amongst related discourses, such as modern slavery and anti-trafficking interventions, Part 1 also demonstrates the importance of the geographical, cultural, and social context of the study. Such contextualisation includes detailing important comparative differences between how Myanmar and Lao migrants are integrated into Thai society, which is crucial for appreciating how safe migration activities unfold.

   Part 2, Modalities of Intervention, documents ethnographically how aid agencies operationalise safe migration through policy frameworks, ranging from policy interventions premised on behaviouralist discourses and anticipatory logics (such as pre-departure training of migrants), state-centric safety provision in the form of legal migration pathways (passports, work permits), and the regulation of migration infrastructure (recruitment agencies) to various safety net mechanisms (hotlines and outreach services). As will become evident, all these interventions relativise spatial and temporal dimensions of policy which furnish mediating practices that are often counter-intentional to formal policy.

   Part 3, Safety Mediated, explicates how the various modalities of interventions discussed in Part 2 intersect with a range of local practices

and contexts. The importance of brokers as mediators of assistance must be understood in light of how different humanitarian registers works differently across different institutions (such as health services compared with labour dispute resolution cases). At the same time, Part 3 demonstrates through meticulous ethnographic detail how brokerage and migration assistance are part of the same configuration, and how brokerage is situated within a range of informal practices including both old (reciprocity, moral economies) and new forms of connectivity (social media) which helps explain how safe migration is ultimately underpinned by brokered safety.