

# การเมืองเรื่องแต่งงาน : จาก“แรงงานอพยพชาวพม่า”มาสู่ “คนสองน้ำ” ในพื้นที่ชายแดนจังหวัดระนอง<sup>1</sup>

## The Politics of Marriage: From ‘Burmese Laborers’ to be ‘Kon Song Nam’ in Ranong Border<sup>1</sup>

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## บทคัดย่อ

การดำรงอยู่เป็น “คนสองน้ำ” หรือ “คนสองสัญชาติ” ในจังหวัดรนองเป็นเงื่อนไขสำคัญที่ทำให้มีโอกาสขยับเลื่อนสถานะทางเศรษฐกิจของแรงงานชาวพม่า ทำให้เกิดการแสวงหาแนวทางที่จะได้รับสถานะทางกฎหมายสองสัญชาติ แรงงานอพยพชาวพม่าในช่วงทศวรรษ 2550 ได้เริ่มต้นสร้างแนวทางใหม่ที่จะทำให้ได้รับสถานะทางกฎหมาย คือ การแต่งงาน ทำให้ขอborgของความเป็น “คนสองน้ำ” ขยายตัวมากขึ้น จากเดิมที่ “คนสองน้ำ” จะจำกัดตัวอยู่ในสองลักษณะ คือ การใช้ความเป็นเครือญาติ ซึ่งต้องเป็นคนดังเดิมอันจะเป็นอย่างไม่เป็นทางการ และการสมบัตรคนตาย ซึ่งในช่วงทศวรรษ 2550 ทำได้ยากมากขึ้น การแต่งงานจึงกลายเป็นแนวทางที่ได้รับความนิยม เพราะทำได้ง่าย และรวดเร็วกว่าวิธีอื่น การได้สามีหรือภรรยาเป็นคนไทย มีส่วนช่วยขยับสถานะทางกฎหมายในการทำงานของแรงงานอพยพ ส่งผลให้มีสถานะทางเศรษฐกิจและความเป็นอยู่ของครอบครัวดีขึ้นอย่างมีนัยยะสำคัญ การศึกษาเมืองชายแดน เช่น จังหวัดรนอง จำเป็นที่จะต้องพิจารณา “ความเป็นชายแดน” ในมุมมองของ “เมืองเชื่อมต่อ” (Connected City) ซึ่งจะทำให้เข้าใจถึงความซับซ้อนการแสวงหาแนวทางในการเปลี่ยนแปลงตนเองเพื่อดำรงอยู่อย่างมีสถานภาพ

**คำสำคัญ:** แรงงานอพยพชาวพม่า คนสองน้ำ สถานะทางเศรษฐกิจ

## Abstract

The existence of ‘Khon Song Nam’ or ‘people with dual citizenship’ in Ranong is an important condition to level up the economic status of Burmese laborers. In fact, the way to have legal dual citizenship has been sought. Burmese laborers in B.E. 2550 tried to find out a way to have legal status by marriage. Hence, the scope of ‘Khon Song Nam’ has been extended. That is, ‘Khon Song Nam’ was first limited in two characteristics: relatives who were unofficially native and fake identities of deceased people, which have been difficult to do. Nowadays, marriage has been popular because it is easier and quicker than other ways. Having Thai husbands or wives can assist to enhance the legal status of their work. In consequence, their economic status and well-being have significantly been better. Border studies, such as in Ranong, are necessary to consider a ‘border’ in a dimension of a ‘connected city’. Therefore, the complexity to find out the way of self-changes to live with status can be understood.

**Keywords:** Burmese Labors, Khon Song Nam, Economic Status

## Introduction

According to the economic growth in the border area of Ranong in each period, low-skilled labors are demanded as an important line to expand the economy, especially Burmese labors who have migrated to Ranong in order to support the expansion of fishing business since the end of 2530s BE. Interestingly, Ranong has a coast, connecting to Myanmar, where contains abundance of fishes. Therefore, main incomes of Ranong have been gained from fishing business and production industries [1] instead of mine industry which was the past resources for the highest numbers of incomes before 2550s BE. It can be seen that modern fishing business and production industries need a lot of unskilled labors.

The results of Thailand's economic growth and Myanmar's political problems revealed that 'Kon Song Nam' or dual citizens have played the most important role in the economy in Ranong border. 'Kon Song Nam' have been important economic mediators in a context of trading problems and essential mechanism for the economy in Ranong border. Especially in 1995, Myanmar opened the border for joint venture of fishing concessions. This distinctly influenced a role of 'Kon Song Nam', and Ranong became a fishing industry area attracting a lot of Burmese people to work as labors. Some labors who had a status of alien labors saw some benefits of being 'Kon Song Nam'. Originally, 'Kon Song Nam' were limited in two types: relationships of relatives who were unofficially local people in Ranong and fake identity of decreased people, which was harder to do after 2550s BE. Therefore, Burmese labors tried to find out other ways to become 'Kon Song Nam' in order to access resources and benefit themselves and their counterparts. This could differently enhance their living and economic status. According people movements during the world's situations of money, thoughts, things, knowledge, and cultures through borders, studies of migrants, immigrants, and Diasporas have been researched since 1980s. Teerawut Senakum [2] concluded the overall studies of Diasporas clearly. The studies were divided into two groups: concepts of Diasporas and Diaspora conditions, which were different based on views for asking questions to Diasporas. In the first concept, Diasporas were classified into a few types: people who were victims, people who were labors, and people who moved due to trades. These Diasporas were interpreted and defined inflexibly while a concept after looking at these Diasporas as a new group under the conditions of history, culture, politics, and discourse affected the identity of Diasporas with mixed races.

In this article, Burmese labors in Mueang, Ranong province were looked at, regardless of their status of Diasporas who were forced to move from their old places and stayed in other places with depression and bad experiences. Burmese labors in this study served as a new group of people who can select what is suitable for their lives.

## Objective

To show the economic and living status of Burmese labors in Ranong through the method to be ‘Kon song Nam’ or legal dual citizens.

## Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted according to historical research methodology and focused on related documents and studies of historical stories in the border and cross-border labors in Ranong, including field-trip data collection. In-depth interview and observation were employed to 10 families of Burmese labors who had married Thai people for more than three years. The families who could give a beneficial information and recommend other families were selected in this study. Participant and non-participant observation were also conducted. The key informants were Burmese labors, Thai immigrants to Ranong area due to economic changes at any period of time, and local people who had seen a lot of changes for more than 60 years. All of the informants lived in the area which was Mueang, Ranong. After that, the data were checked in terms of individuals, places, and duration before the data were categorized through the process of interpretation, phenomenological analysis based on rationales for conclusion. The data were finally presented by description.

## Results

The study on marriage: from Burmese labors to be ‘Kon Song Nam’ in Ranong Border reflected three main topics. First, migration and living of Burmese labors after entering Ranong showed that both countries mutually helped the labor migrate to Ranong. Second, the method to be ‘Kon Song Nam’ showed the personal relationships among the border people, which helped to solve problems on economic and political policy changes of Thai and Burmese governments. Third, the economic and living status of Burmese labor families

after becoming ‘Kon Song Nam’ showed the necessity of law for facilitating the labors’ working, which could result in their better economic and living status.

## **1. Migration of Burmese Labors and their living after entering Ranong**

Migrant labors have been working in Ranong for a long time because the Ronong border area connects with Kawthaung in Tanintharyi Division, Myanmar, and it is a natural border of Andaman Sea and Kra Buri River. Geographically, travelling in this area is out of both governments’ control. For another reason, Burmese labors need to have secure incomes, but employment in Myanmar is very low. Plus, wages in Thailand are higher than they are in Myanmar. However, surprisingly, the lowest wages in Ranong are still lower than they are in Bangkok and Metropolis, and the cost of living in Ranong is quite high [3], as well as it takes very longer to travel to Ranong due to far distance and inconvenient routes. The results were relevant to the study of cross-border migration by Kritaya Archavanitkul and et al. [4], which were presented that the main causes of the cross-border migration were differences of economic growth, travelling convenience, and information of migration from friends and relatives. In addition, due to geographical obstacles in Ranong area, labors from the Northeast or other parts of Thailand were not interested to work there like in the past. In terms of climates, it rains a lot and more than it does in other parts of Thailand; it is not thus suitable for daily employment thanks to shorter working hours. According to personality of Burmese labors—working hard, patience, and no complaints about their welfares, Thai employers prefer to hire Burmese labors.

### **1.1 Migration of Burmese labors to Ranong before 2530s BE**

From 2500 BE until before 2530s BE, travelling between two countries at the border were flexible, there were not many Burmese labors in Ranong, and there were no immigration points [5] to officially control foreigners’ travelling. Therefore, it was normal for Burmese labors to enter Ranong. Burmese labors mostly from Kawthaung and Myeik entered only for work in the morning and left in the evening without staying overnight in Ranong [6]. All of these labors were unskilled and worked in charcoal kiln factories, sawmills, and mines.

The arrival of Burmese labors before 2530s BE was necessary for economy in Ranong because Burmese labors replaced labors from the Northeast of Thailand, who could not resist to hard work. Mr. Panya Reok-urai, the former Ranong governor, was interviewed with the Nation Newspaper on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1977 that a mine owner had hired a truck to

carry labors from Surin to work in Ranong, but when they reached Ranong, they could not be patient for hard work, and then they resigned from the job. In contrast, Burmese labors could do this job easily [7]. Once there were more Burmese labors working in Ranong in 1977, the immigration point required a certificate of Temporary Border pass. At present, it can be used only once for a person to enter and stay in Ranong no more than one week. It resulted that most Burmese labors came to work as fishers for a short time and went back to their country without renting houses like they do now. Labors who worked for fish ports, sawmills, shipyards, or agriculture stayed in small houses personally provided by their employers since Burmese labors at that time were illegal migrants, and there was no policy by the government to permit alien labors to work and register in Thailand

### **1.2 Migration of Burmese labors to Ranong after 2530s BE**

After the announcement of Exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in neighbor countries during 1977-1982, the scope of Thai fishing was decreased. However, the area of Ranong border was not affected by this scope, and fishing business in Ranong had extremely grew up since 1982. Until 2530s BE, in Thailand, a policy to change a war zone to a trade zone was developed to promote production for export in order to replace import. In addition, the agricultural production structure was adjusted to be industrial, resulting in the economic growth in Ranong [8]. While the economy in Ranong was growing up, labors from the Northeast wanted to go home due to a royal project called the Northeastern Green Project happening to their home. Some of them went to work in the Middle East because of popularity at that time. Therefore, fewer northeastern labors worked in Ranong, and some northeastern labors who had already worked in Ranong went home [9]. Nevertheless, according to political situations in Myanmar [10], it resulted in a large number of Burmese labors nearby coming to Ranong and later with their families. At this time, they rented houses for their families and semi-permanently lived in Burmese community.

Since fishing and industrial businesses required multiple hardworking labors for fishing boats, product transfer and movements, labors who came to work in the morning and went back to their country in the evening became migrant labors staying in Ranong longer. For another reason to have Burmese labors, incomes of people in Ranong were quite high, so there were hardly Thai people working as unskilled labors. Moreover, Thai employers preferred to hire labors with low wages in order to reduce production cost, and Burmese

labors could be the best choice for them in Ranong after 2530s BE. For the aforementioned reasons, Ranong was as if the light at the end of the tunnel for Burmese labors to flee from their political situations under the military dictatorship of the government and look for well-beings for themselves and their families.



**Figure 1** The semi-permanent community of Burmese labors in Ranong  
(taken on Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2021 at 3.30 p.m.)

## 2. The ways to become 'Kon Song Nam'

The economic growth in Ranong influenced the big wave of Burmese migrant labors; in consequence, the government realized the quantity control of Burmese labors. In 1994, immigration checkpoint was established at Saphan Plaa Pier and illegal Burmese labors were seriously checked. As a result of the government's strict regulations, Burmese labors found difficulty and risk to stay in Ranong, and they had to stay in fear and were not sure that they could have a chance to work in Ranong in the future. U Ye Htut said that once Burmese labors had been expelled to Myanmar until there were none of them left in Ranong, but there were some of them hiding on boats. Some Burmese labors went back to Kawthaung or their hometown. In the end of 1995, the situation was worse that even labors with permit certificates were pushed to go home because their homeowners with whom they rent houses were forced by the police. House owners who had Burmese labors in their houses had to be punished [11]. Regarding the control and force to Burmese labors by Thai law and other regulations, for example, the registration of alien labors was annually dealt with high expenses and allowed to some specific businesses and specific areas in 1997 [12]. In addition, these migrant labors could not be provided with state welfare or medical services, so it was very

difficult for them to live their lives in Ranong. For this reason, Burmese labors saw some benefits from being dual citizens or called ‘Kon Song Nam’ and sought for a way to be ‘Kon Song Nam’ in order to have more opportunity to access career path. Moreover, they would live their lives in Ranong without escaping from seizure. Since 2550s BE, Burmese labors have tried to search for other complex ways to become ‘Kon Song Nam’.

In this article, three ways to be ‘Kon Song Nam’ were explained. First, becoming Thai relatives means Burmese labors have to be native people back in the time before the Thai borderline was determined, and modern nation state citizens were clearly defined before 2500s BE. However, this way is unofficial and known only in groups of ‘Kon Song Nam’ and native people in Ranong. Second, fake identities of deceased people is another way to claim that these people’s name have not been registered in population survey. This way needs cooperation from some groups of government officers or networks of shady businesses to help to make legal documents. Nevertheless, it was more difficult in 2550s BE to have fake documents for subrogation. Third, marriage means Burmese labors working in Ranong marry Thai people, but most of them live together without a legal marriage certificate. It was also found that they know the benefits from being ‘Kon song Nam’ by marriage, and this way is more popular, easier, and faster than other ways.

It could be explained that ‘Kon Song Nam’ was originally influenced from settlement of Chinese people who had come to Ranong to work as labors in tin mines since 1862. Later, when England invaded and took over Myanmar, and the border line was determined in 1868 [13], people in Thailand and Myanmar were obviously separated. However, the people in two countries had good relationships with one another and were relatives, so they still visited and counted on one another. Sia Khao gave some information that ‘Kon Song Nam’ was Thai people who lived in Kawthaung before it was taken over by England. As a result of, they had to become Burmese citizens holding Burmese identification cards. When they were allowed to enter Thailand, they could also have Thai identification cards. Therefore, they had dual citizenship and could travel in and out of both countries [14].

Their daily routine of commuting between two areas later became a way to build their families’ economic security. For mine business, the price of minerals were down and not good for the production cost at that time. However, the route to Ranong was developed, and there was a new road-Phetkrasem Road-which was a main way to import some

consumption products from Chomphon and Bangkok to Ranong. In the meantime, some smuggled products were imported from China through Kawthaung. In consequence, 'Kon Song Nam' who had owned mines or worked in mines became middlemen to sell products between the borders, and they earned a lot of profits and economic security. Ko Thong, an owner of Kitpaisan Limited Partnership, said about running business in that past that products from Dawei, Myeik, and Yangon had to pass through Kawthaung. They ran their businesses for a long time, and most of them were relatives; therefore, they knew about the routes to import products very well [15].

Regarding the adjustment of these people, like people living near the borders, they at first only travelled for inter-state trades. However, unlike people living near the borders, later they did not hold only one nationality or any nationality. They held two nationalities, which built the very fast economic growth in Ranong. Cross-border trades with 'Kon Song Nam' middlemen led to convenience and profitability. Until 2520s BE, the economic changes in Ranong was related to the economy in Bangkok. As a result, new investors, especially from Chomphon, ordered products from Bangkok to sell in Myanmar. Retail trading was changed to wholesale trading. More products were hoarded, and working capital was very high; consequently, 'Kon Song Nam' who ran business using relatives' relationships with small capital could not hoard products and sell products with credits. They had to quit their roles and were willing to be disregard 'Kon Song Nam' citizenship because of no benefits to their businesses like in the past. In addition, a number of Kon Song Nam' relatives between two borders from generation to generation reduced, and their offspring could not gain benefits from this kind of citizenship. After that, there was no necessary to cross the border for trading, but the benefits from border economy was increasingly good due to rough relationships between Thai and Myanmar. Hence, other ways to become 'Kon Song Nam' were tried and adjusted in Ranong border.

Fake identities of deceased people occurred because relatives' relationships of 'Kon Song Nam' were decreased, and it was harder to hold Thai nationality. Although some people had some relatives in Ranong, and they still commuted between two borders, most of them were born and lived in Myanmar. They still saw opportunity to come into the economic area in Ranong and became business owners. Fake identities of deceased people was a way chosen in Ranong border. In 2530s BE, there was a natural disaster causing a very

large number of dead and lost people; therefore, these people were failed to registered. For instance, Uncle Yoi (an assumed name) talked about Typhoon Gay in Chomphon and Kra Buri, Ranong. There were a lot of dead and lost people in this disaster, and Burmese people used this opportunity to be ‘Kon Song Nam’. This way was effective when it was cooperated with Thai government officers who had roles in coordination to find out relatives of dead people or give relatives some payments in order not to notify the death. Then some Burmese people who had contacted the officers were given the names of dead and lost people. In fact, this method was used for some Burmese who had money. After that, their names were changed to be Thai names, and new identification cards were made. One of teachers in Pak Chan said that there was one person named Ka-Ma who had a card and a Thai surname. It was said that she had a fake name from a deceased person because she had paid a deceased person’s relatives some money in order not to notify death, and then she moved her name into a house registration as a Thai citizen [16].

After 2550s BE, it was harder to use fake identity of deceased people because, apart from spending money for it, it needed some illegal help from Thai government officers. According to the research results, it turned out that there were no Burmese labors using fake identity of deceased people to become ‘Kon Song Nam’. They chose to marry Thai people and live without marriage certificates. Therefore, marriage was an easier, faster and more popular way than other ways, and it led to economic security to increase their incomes when compared to other Burmese people marrying their counterparts.

### **3. Economic and living status of Burmese labors and their families after being ‘Kon Song Nam’**

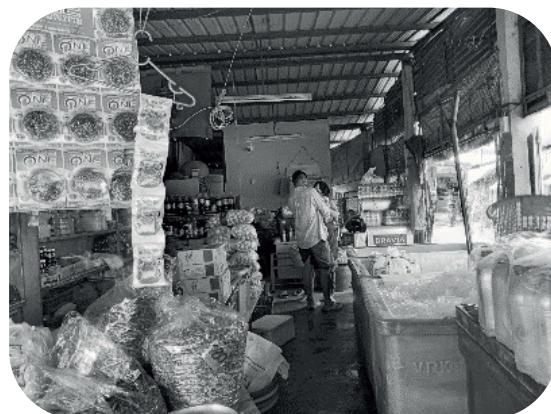
The results of the in-depth interview with the samples of Burmese labors, it was found that they became ‘Kon Song Nam’ with good determination. They learned some information and specific behavior from their friends and relatives who had Thai husbands.

For example, Miss Kanda (an assumed name), 26, from Dawei entered Ranong with her mother and brother in 2538 BE after her father worked in a construction site in Ranong. She said that her aunt married to a Thai husband who worked as an electrician and general worker. After that, her husband’s younger sister help her get a job as a caregiver for bedridden patients with 8,000 Baht/month. She has a house and everything because of her husband. If she had not known him, she would have had harder life. She had been a worker to select fish and clean fish baskets with only 50 Baht/day of wages. At present, she can send money

back to her family in Myanmar and has better life [17]. Therefore, this has been the beginning of positive attitudes to marry Thai people and become a model and expectation to find a way to change themselves for better lives.

Having Thai husbands is not only a shortcut way to find an opportunity to have security in their lives, but it is also a channel to access resources and have power to negotiate with the government. Similarly to the daily routines of Mae Kaew (an assumed name) who comes from Bokpyin, Tanintharyi Division, Myanmar, after entering Ranong to work in a grocery store, she could save a sum of money to buy things for peddling in a determined area, but she had to flee from the control of government officials. Then she tried to seek for a way to have power to negotiate with the government and working flexibility.

Mae Kaew said that she married to a Thai husband from Chonburi, who moved to Ranong because of fishing industry growth in 2533 BE. Marrying him made her have a small grocery store selling onions, garlcs, and other things in a fresh market (Talad Lang). The grocery was legally registered with her husband's name, and survived from the government's inspection [18].



**Figure 2** Mae Kaew's grocery store in a market at Soi Pakdee in Mueang, Ronong.

(taken on Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2021 at 10.00 a.m.)

In terms of their families' economic and living status, the results revealed that the Burmese labors who became 'Kon Song Nam' had better life and economic status. At first they crowdedly lived together in their employers' provided houses or small rental houses near a fish port. In contrast, they currently have more money and afford to buy things, they

also have job opportunity, household facilities, and self-learning opportunity. According to the field trip and the interview, Ipew (Burmese name of which she is still proud), a girl from Bokpyin, crossed the natural border pass when she was two years old. She remembered that her mother was very poor, and her mother said that they could be harder to live in Myanmar. Therefore, her mother took her and her sister to see her father who worked in a fishing boat. They also had other relatives who had been staying in Ranong. Their family was quite lucky because the fish port's owner was kind, so Ipew had a chance to study and graduate Prathomsueksa 6 (grade 6), and worked in a shoes and clothes shop at a market. After that, her boyfriend help her get a job at a hospital as an interpreter for nurses and doctors when there are some Burmese patients because she can speak three languages: Thai, English, and Burmese. Then she married Thai husband [19].



**Figure 3** A working routine of a Burmese labor becoming ‘Kon Song Nam’ by marriage (taken on Tuesday, 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021 at 10.00 a.m. at Ranong hospital, Mueang, Ranong)

Therefore, Ipew was one of the samples who has had better economic and living status after marrying Mr. Bunlert Kerdthai (an assumed name), her Thai husband, and become ‘Kon Song Nam’. She could also build a house on her husband’s land, own three motorcycles for convenient daily routines, have household appliance such as a television, a refrigerator, a fan, including a double-tube washing machine which is the most facilitated appliance for Burmese labors.



**Figure 4** A house of Ipew, Burmese labor becoming ‘Kon Song Nam’ by marriage  
(taken on Tuesday, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2021 at 3.00 p.m. in Mueang, Ranong)

Furthermore, Ipew had an idea of saving money by depositing 2,000 Baht/month at a bank in order to be a medical fund even if she has a benefit from the Universal Health Coverage and an educational fund for her only son in the future. It was interesting that her idea was very different from other Burmese labors living in Ranong, who preferred several children due to their beliefs that there would be more labors to help families.

According to all these stories, it reflected that marrying to Thai people and being ‘Kon Song Nam’ greatly affected their economic and living status of Burmese labors. It was found that Burmese labors being ‘Kon Song Nam’ had power to negotiate with the government. They could also have opportunity to find better jobs with good working hours and their ability and knowledge, which influenced on higher incomes and better quality of life. However, when Burmese labors marry each other, they could not choose jobs or negotiate any benefits. Most of them had to work for a fishing business and production industries such as labors for carrying things in fish ports, labors in factories’ production line, and so on with a lot of conditions and limitations.

## Conclusion

The study of the politics of marriage: change of status from Burmese labors to ‘Kon Sing Nam’ in Ranong Border can be concluded that the adjustment of the Burmese labors’ living status in Mueang, Ranong was mainly changed when Burmese labors and their followers were arrested at the end of 1995. As a result, they had to hide themselves, and their families

and followers had to go back to Kawthaung in Tanintharyi Division, Myanmar and follow up the situations in order to survive from being arrested by Thai government officers. This is relevant to the study by Kritaya Archavanitkul [20] stating that some cross-border labors from Myanmar were often violated from their rights and exploited by Thai government officers when they first travelled to Thailand. Similarly to the study by Adisorn Kerdmongkol [21], it was found that Burmese labors had to face risks to work in Thailand and violent from operation by Thai government officers when they were arrested and forced to pay for no arrest. Therefore, this situation influenced Burmese labors to find out a negotiation way for their economic security and their families' living status. These findings were in accordance with a suggestion by Sutharin Koonphol [22] that people's daily routines could not actually survive from negotiations, competitions, and power control; therefore, these situations happened in people's lives and were considered struggles to survive.

Although, according to the concept of Diasporas, it was indicated that movement and distribution of people migrating from their original locations were determined to be the main topic of Diasporas studies, this study was focused on Burmese labors in Mueang Ranong without consideration of their Diasporas status which was forced to move from their former places and stay in other places with their depression and bad experiences. In this research, these Burmese labors were considered new constructed people who could choose the most suitable things for their lives while facing some bad experiences. When Burmese labors wanted to stay in Ranong area, it became the beginning to see some advantages of being 'Kon Song Nam'. Being 'Kon Song Nam' could be a beneficial way for their negotiation with Thai government's power. They tried to be 'Kon Song Nam' by marriage because they had no relationships with relatives of the original 'Kon Song Nam', and they could not afford to do fake identity of decreased people. 'Kon Song Nam' could thus be a good way for them to work and live in Ranong conveniently. However, according to the results in this study, it was found that only female labors used this method of marriage possibly because of the social value of the local people. Therefore, there has been no marriage between Thai female people and male Burmese people.

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