

## Final Report —Activity Report—

### Title. Opposite Directions

#### 1. Activity Overview

The project “Opposite Directions” is an artistic research exploring the experiences of Southeast Asian migrant workers in Singapore, Japan and Myanmar. For the first and second months (July and August 2018) I stayed in Singapore. For the third month, I relocated to Tokyo, Japan. For the final month, I travelled to Yangon, Myanmar.

In each city, I focused on a different topic, depending on an interesting aspect of the migrant experience in that city. For Singapore, a city I spent the longest time in this research, I concentrated on ways that migrant workers transformed the public space into their communal space, as well as the situation of women workers in Singapore. For Tokyo, I concentrated on the lives of Burmese refugees who came to seek an asylum in Japan. For Yangon, the topic I focus is a reversal of the topic in Japan. By this I mean I focused on the Burmese workers who returned to Myanmar after they had worked in other countries.

After collecting all the information, what I see is the variety of stories of the migrant workers; stories that relate to each other and stories that go across countries. I have collected enough raw data for me to develop them into artworks in the future.

#### 2. Status of activity at the host institution(s) or the content of collaboration with (a) host individual(s), and fellowship activity record

My activities with the host institutions in each city were different depending on the type of host institutions. In Singapore, my host institution was the Office of Labour Affairs, Royal Thai Embassy, Singapore. Since the office does not have art and cultural departments, I turned to ask for collaborations from other non-governmental organisations, including Friends of Thai Workers Association (Singapore), Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), and Project X. With their expertise on issues related to migrant workers, the staff in these organisations gave me interviews, allowed me to record their opinions, and took me to observe the migrant workers in various places.

For the time in Tokyo, Japan, my host institution was the Tokyo Arts and Space (previous name: Tokyo Wonder Site). Since this is an art space which has many art specialists, I had a chance to work with the team. The staff at the Tokyo Arts and Space helped me to track down Burmese refugees in Tokyo and finally I had an opportunity to interview them. For the time in Yangon, Myanmar, my host institution was Myanmar Art Resource Centre and Archive (MARCA) Yangon. I went to meet Nathalie Johnston, who is a member of MARCA as well as a curator at Myanmar/art (art space). I consulted with her about my project as well as discussing the art scene in Yangon. I had a chance to see the art space, how it was run, as well as meeting other artists in Yangon.

Apart from the help of these organization, I also received support from local artists, curators, and friends. I conducted the research after I received guidance from them.

In the following are the details of activities in each country that I visited.

#### Singapore

Period: July 1 – August 31, 2018

Base of activity (address of my rental accommodation): The Heliconia, 30 Jln Daud, Singapore, 419572

There are two activities in Singapore that I want to highlight. First, it is an interview. Second, it is an exploration of

lands, parks, forests, and gardens which relates to the situation of migrant workers.



Photo 1: Burmese workers' meeting at a park near Peninsula Plaza. Photo credit: Prapat Jiwarangsan

I started my project at Friends of Thai Workers Association (Singapore), an organization where I met Mr Preecha Kornthong, the president of the association and Dr Rungnapa Kitiarsa, a University lecturer who teaches English to the migrant workers at the association. At this place, I received 'Kon Glai Ban' (or "Persons far from home"), a book which contains stories written by Thai migrant workers expressing their experiences in Singapore). One of the stories that inspired me most was the story from a Thai sex worker who had come to Singapore many times and worked at a makeshift brothel in a jungle. She had been betrayed by a police who received her bribery but sent her to a prison. Inspired by her dramatic life, I conducted a research about Singapore's public spaces, particularly the parks and the forest. What I discovered were ways in which many migrant workers transformed the public parks and shopping malls into their communal and cultural-specific spaces. Migrant workers from the same nationality would go to the same place to hang out in their free days (Sunday). I also travelled to many parks and forests, ones in which were scenes of migrant crimes. Most of these parks and forests are not in Singapore's centre. They are in the north of Singapore, though there are some places that are in the middle of Singapore, close to factory areas. When going there, I was surprised to see that, most of these places were 'transformed' after the crime. In some places, trees were cut down. In other places, the park was renovated or even prohibited to enter. I took the photo and shot a footage, with an intention to use them for my future artwork.



Photo 2: The parks at Woodland Avenue 4 in the northern Singapore. The place was once used as a jungle brothel by illegal migrant workers in 2016. However, when I go there, as the picture shows, the place is being renovated.

Photo credit: Prapat Jiwarangsana

The stories in Kon Glai Ban book also led me to search for knowledge about the welfare of women migrant workers in Singapore. I interviewed many staffs from various NGOs about the situation. I was so surprised by many laws and regulations as well as the oppression that the women workers need to face in Singapore. I also interviewed two domestic workers, one from Thailand, the other from the Philippines.

## Japan

Period: September 1 -30 , 2018

Base of activity (artist residency): Tokyo Arts and Space Residency 1F, 2-14-7, Tatekawa, Sumida-ku, Tokyo, 130-0023

The main activity in my residency at the Tokyo Arts and Space was to search for a Burmese migrant worker in Tokyo. The searching was difficult than I expected because many migrant workers did not live in Tokyo, let alone the Burmese ones. Also, Japan has had a strict rule on giving a refugee status, and many applicants were rejected. That said, with a help from the Tokyo Arts and Space, I finally meet a number of Southeast Asian refugees. The first was Mr Kyaw Kyaw Soe, a Burmese human rights activist who has lived in Tokyo as a refugee for many decades. The second was Mr Kyaw Kyaw Soe's wife. The third was Ma Hay Mar, a woman who taught the Burmese language to Japanese people. The fourth was Uncle Suthep, a Laotian man who moved from Laos to Thailand and finally moved to Japan during the Vietnamese war.



Photo 3 and 4: Left: Photo of Kyaw Kyaw Soe. Right: Photo of me and Ma Hay Mar and Uncle Suthep.

Photo credit: Prapat Jiwarangsana

The person who shared me the most amount of information was Mr Kyaw Kyaw Soe. I interviewed him at his restaurant, which served Burmese food. He was a generation of Burmese who was affected by the political situation in Myanmar in the 1980s. At that time when the political scene kept getting worse, he decided to leave the country by going to stay in Thailand, and later applying for a VISA to stay in Japan. I was especially interested in his experience in Thailand. I have never viewed Thailand as a 'middle country' for the migrant workers before. My Kyaw also shared me a chapter in his life, a difficult one, when he tried to live in Japan during the first years. He also shared me the exciting

stories of him going to Thailand to pick up his wife who came to stay with him in Japan. Moreover, Mr Kyaw shared me stories of other migrant workers who may not have luck on their sides, as well as his opinion on the current situation in Myanmar, in which he viewed it positively. My Kyaw's stories gave me an entry point to the narrative of Burmese workers who went out of their home country. This was very important during my fellowship because he also gave me a few contacts of people whom I should talk to when I was in Myanmar in the month after.

Apart from interviewing the migrant workers, I also participated in an introductory talk and networking activities for artists at the Tokyo Arts and Space.

## **Myanmar**

Period: October, 1– 21, 2018

Base of activity (hotel): Hotel Esta, 19/20 Bogyoke, Aung San Road, Downtown, Yangon, Yangon. Tel: +6692-490-4987

There are two activities in Yangon, Myanmar, that I want to highlight: the interview of workers and the shooting at a Zoological Garden.

Linking to the project's title (Opposite Directions), when I came to Yangon, I searched for migrant workers who had worked outside of the country but returned to home already. With a connection from Mr Kyaw and my friend in Thailand, I interviewed three Burmese workers who once worked outside of Myanmar. They are Saw Aung Than Wai, a Burmese who once worked in Thailand but has moved back to live in Yangon, Myint Tiggy, a Burmese worker, and Johnson Kim, a Burmese worker. In order to see the issue from a different perspective, I interviewed Jaqueline Pollock, a chief technical advisor for Migration Projects at International Labour organization (ILO).



Photo 5: Mr. Johnson Kim

The two persons who inspired me most are Mynt Tiggy and Johnson Kim. Tiggy's story mirrored Mr Kyaw's story. He and his family worked, and decided to apply for refugee status in Japan. Yet, unlike Mr Kyaw, Tiggy and his family did not receive refugee status. As a result, he and his family returned to live in Myanmar. Kim's story was different. He was

born in Shan State, a geopolitical area on the North Eastern territory. There is a long history of political tension between Shan state and the Myanmar government. Kim's experience as a migrant worker painted a different narrative from the stories I witnessed in Singapore and Japan. Most of the migrant workers whom I interviewed in Singapore and Japan were domestic workers (including housemaids), but Kim worked with non-governmental organisations in Thailand. The reason he relocated to live in Myanmar was also a personal one, as he wanted to start a family. Whereas Tiggy's story was similar to Kyaw, Kim's account showed a story of a new generation of Burmese workers whose migrations were caused by economics, instead of politics.

Apart from the interviews, I had a chance to visit Yangon Zoological Garden, a site where I was fascinated by. The zoological garden has not only a zoo part, but also an exhibition and taxidermy theatre. I shot many photographs and footages of this place, with a hope that I can use them as a part of my future artworks.

### **3. Prospects for the project**

After the end of the fellowship period, I will spend the time to look into the archive of information that I so far collected. The information will be viewed as raw material. Since there are many stories, narratives and issues in the data that I gathered, I need to select a story, develop it further and turn it into an art piece. It will be a part of my future work, which I intend to give a result in the form of a short film and an installation for gallery spaces.