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Navigating Marginalization through Religion: Intersectionality and Shifting Positionalities Among Myanmar Migrant Workers in Thailand

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Abstract: This study explores how Myanmar migrant workers experience marginalization shaped by the intersection of their social identities and migrant status, and how their shared religious identity with the Thai majority supports them in navigating this marginalization through the lens of translocational positionality. Three focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 Myanmar migrant workers and 18 Thai locals, including Buddhist monks. Thematic analysis revealed that the workers faced legal and institutional vulnerability, economic exploitation, and cultural stigmatization, produced through the intersecting axes of nationality, legal and migrant status, cultural background, and transnational forces. Shared Buddhist identity with the host majority emerged as a strategic and symbolic resource through which Myanmar migrant workers navigated their marginalized status. Religious resemblance provided a sense of moral belonging, cultural familiarity, and access to religious spaces, which served as crucial platforms for coping with legal and economic challenges, creating safe cultural spaces, shifting economic and moral positioning, and cultivating a sense of belonging and a new 'home' in Thailand. This study highlights the translocational nature of migrants' positioning—how they shift emphasis across identity markers depending on the social and institutional terrain they navigate.

Keywords: Intersectionality, marginalization, migrant workers, religious resemblance, transnational positionality.

International migration is a complex global phenomenon that profoundly impacts the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual dimensions of migrants' lives (Haas et al., 2020). Migrant workers across diverse regions are frequently reported to experience exploitation and marginalization in the labor market (Wright et al., 2023). Their identities are rarely defined by a single category. Instead, they are shaped by the intersection of multiple axes such as migrant status, class, gender, race, and language. For example, research from the United States, Europe, and Asia consistently shows that overlapping identities create layered vulnerabilities, including unstable legal status, discriminatory workplace practices, and limited access to social protections (Bonello et al., 2025; Fresnoza-Flot & Shinozaki, 2017; Palumbo, 2023; Shishakly, 2025; Verghis, 2023).

Although several studies investigate migrants' vulnerability and marginalization through multiple axes, their identities are often treated as static. To comprehend the intricate

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dynamics of4 identity and marginalization within migratory contexts, Anthias (2008) argued that cultural formation and identity, in terms of location, are fluid in context, meaning, and time. Migrants hold diverse "positions" and "belongings" that are not confined to a single location but are interconnected with the translocational spaces they inhabit (Anthias, 2013). Her concept of translocational positionality helps conceptualize identity as a dynamic and relational process rather than limiting it to portray migrants as victims of overlapping oppressions, and it also reveals how they navigate, negotiate, and sometimes transform those intersecting power relations across different social and spatial contexts.

Religion, as an axis of identity, intersects with others such as gender, nationality, and class to shape both vulnerability and resilience. It can marginalize migrants when tied to racialization or state ideology, but it can also empower them by creating networks of belonging, solidarity, and moral agencies that help them navigate precarious conditions (Bell et al., 2021; Guveli & Platt, 2023; Koenig, 2023). Religious practices are not merely spiritual solace, but also "social and political acts" (Nordin & Otterbeck, 2023, p. 56), enabling migrants to construct identity spaces, assert agency, and develop a sense of belonging in restrictive contexts. Most studies, however, focus on migrants whose religious beliefs differ from the dominant religion in the destination country. Research on migrants who share a religious identity with the host society remains limited, particularly in Southeast Asia. Exploring shared religious identity enables us to move beyond the usual focus on identity composition. It provides insight into how common religious bonds enable migrants to navigate intersecting social structures, negotiate a sense of belonging, and potentially transform power relations within the host society.

In Southeast Asia, Thailand has emerged as a primary destination for migrant workers from neighboring countries, particularly Myanmar, who constitute the largest migrant group in the country (International Organization for Migration [IOM] Thailand, 2023, p. 3). The flow of Myanmar migrants to Thailand spans several decades, with a notable surge after the 1988 political unrest (Chantavanich & Vungsiriphisal, 2012, p. 215). These flows align with Thailand's labor demand to support economic development. Lately, the February 2021 coup in Myanmar has sparked a resurgence of higher-than-usual migration to Thailand, resulting in an increase in the proportion of Myanmar nationals with irregular immigration status (IOM Thailand, 2025, p. 2). This shift indicates a transition from economic pull factors to push factors related to seeking protection (Thwe, 2022, pp. 3-5). Currently, over 4 million Myanmar nationals reside and work in Thailand, with approximately 1.7 million (nearly half) lacking legal documentation (IOM, 2024).

Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand also experience multiple forms of marginalization arising from the intersection of their identities. Their migrant status, particularly when undocumented, leads to systemic illegalization, economic exploitation, restricted mobility, and exclusion from basic services (Mortensen, 2024), while their ethnic identity further positions them as "others" within Thai society (Areeprachakun, 2020, p. 153). However, the identities of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand are shaped not only by migrant status, nationality, and other social factors, but also by their shared Buddhist identity with the Thai majority, offering a lens to examine both the reproduction and contestation of marginalization. Building on this context, this study aims to investigate how Myanmar migrant workers experience marginalization resulting from the intersection of their social identities and migrant status, and how their shared religious identity with the host majority facilitates them to navigate experiences of marginalization.

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The Conceptual Framework

Marginalization of migrant workers from host societies is a well-documented phenomenon. Migrant workers often face social, economic, and political exclusion not just based on their immigration status, but also due to their race, gender, and other social identities. To understand how different forms of discrimination overlap and compound, creating unique experiences of marginalization among migrant workers in a host country, a number of studies applied the concept of 'intersectionality,' which moves beyond focusing on single aspects of identity to understand how these different factors combine and interact to create unique challenges and opportunities for migrant workers (Miles et al., 2019; Manger et al., 2026).

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) to challenge single-axis frameworks that fail to account for the interconnected nature of race and gender in the marginalization of Black women within antidiscrimination law, as well as in feminist and antiracist theory and politics. She contends that true inclusion requires an intersectional approach that recognizes how these forms of oppression interact in distinct and compounding ways. This concept has broadened to serve as an analytical tool, facilitating the movement of intersectionality within and across disciplines in a range of issues, social identities, power dynamics, and legal and political systems (Cleton & Scuzzarello, 2024; Etherington et al., 2020; Yazdankhoo et al., 2025).

However, the term "post-intersectionality" was later proposed to critically examine and expand upon the concept of intersectionality. Post-intersectionalists recognized some of the limitations of the intersectional model, including that the framework does not offer theoretical depth epistemologically in its application, can sometimes overemphasize specific categories, or oversimplify the complexity of identity and power. Post-intersectionality emphasizes that identities are fluid and multidimensional, constantly shifting and interacting with one another, rather than being fixed or neatly categorized, which enables the examination of how power operates not only between individuals but also within and across social structures and institutions. The analysis of broader social structures and systems that perpetuate inequality is emphasized, rather than focusing solely on individual identities (Kwan, 2000; Mello et al., 2023).

With a focus on understanding contemporary forms of identity construction within the fields of ethnicity, migration, and transnational population movements, Anthias integrated Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality" into her notion of "translocational positionality" (e.g., 2001, 2002, 2008). The concept offers a comprehensive framework for understanding identity and belonging, particularly for individuals and groups navigating migration and residing in complex social contexts. This concept moves beyond traditional, often static, notions of identity, emphasizing individual's "location" (social space that emerges within contextual, spatial, temporal, and hierarchical relationships) and "positionality" (encompassing social positions and practical/meaning-making social positioning) to capture the fluid and contextually embedded nature of belonging.

Translocational positionality offers a holistic understanding of a fundamental shift in identity analysis, moving the focus from what someone 'is' (fixed identity) to 'how' someone becomes, negotiates, and enacts their identity in relation to social spaces and power structures driven by dynamics. For Myanmar workers in Thailand, whose lives are shaped by the intersecting forces of migratory identity, nationality, migrant status, and religious affiliation, this study seeks to uncover how their religious practices contribute to the ongoing process of identity negotiation and social repositioning within the host society. "Religious practices," while fostering migrants' belonging, can simultaneously become a site of contestation and surveillance (Reyes-Espiritu, 2023).

This framework provides a lens through which to examine the construction of immigrant identity as a fluid and continuously negotiated process. Rather than viewing identity as fixed or solely defined by the label "Myanmar migrant," it highlights how identity is shaped through migrants' ongoing interactions with a Thai society that has historically positioned them at the margins. These interactions play a critical role in how migrants construct their social location within the host society and navigate shifts within existing social hierarchies (Anthias, 2008). This perspective not only supports the analytical aims of the study but also enriches the broader academic discourse on social inclusion in Thailand.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology to explore how Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand use religion as a means of adapting to, resisting, or negotiating their marginalized social positions, which arise from the intersection of their national identities and migrant status. Guided by the concept of translocational positionality, the study examines how religious practices and beliefs serve as dynamic resources within migrants' lived experiences, illuminating the complex interplay between identity, power, and social location in a transnational context. The choice of a qualitative approach is particularly suitable for exploring the nuanced social realities, subjective experiences, and complex interplay of vulnerabilities (intersectionality). This approach allows for an in-depth investigation into "how" and "why" these phenomena manifest within the lived experiences of the research participants (Creswell, 2014, pp. 184-200). Data collection employed multiple methods to ensure the acquisition of rich and comprehensive information.

Participants

Fieldwork was conducted in four key provinces of Thailand: Bangkok, Samut Sakhon, Samut Prakan, and Pathum Thani, purposively selected for their high concentration of Myanmar migrant workers and diverse socioeconomic contexts. These provinces span a range of sectors, including manufacturing, fisheries, fishery-related industries, construction, and services, enabling examination of the varied occupational and social experiences of Myanmar migrants. The study focuses on Myanmar migrant workers to explore their shifting positionalities and intersecting identities in translocal contexts, using purposive sampling based on the inclusion criteria of Burmese nationality and at least one year of work experience in Thailand. The approach to Myanmar migrant workers was facilitated by NGOs active in the study areas. To enrich the analysis of translocational positionality, a group of Thai participants was included to provide insight into the host society and to examine power dynamics between dominant and subordinated groups. Their inclusion contributes to a more nuanced understanding of marginalization, negotiation, and belonging. Thai participants were selected based on their involvement in the daily lives and religious practices of Myanmar migrants, including community leaders, Buddhist monks, and Thai residents living in the same communities.

Data Collection

Data collection used in-depth interviews, focus groups (FGs), and participant observation to ensure depth, comprehensiveness, and triangulation. Three FGs explored shared views on religious beliefs and practices, marginalization, negotiation, and belonging. Two groups consisted of Myanmar migrant workers and one of Thai locals, with eight participants per group (24 total). The deliberate separation of FGs between Thai and migrant groups aimed

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to minimize power imbalances and encourage open discussion within each group. This approach created a "safe space" for exchanging ideas and experiences, enabling researchers to access participants' narratives and reasoning in group settings. It also offered insight into how consensus and dissent emerge through interaction, enabling analysis of how marginalization is constructed, negotiated, and potentially transformed (Frisina, 2018, pp. 189–192).

In addition to focus groups, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 key informants: 12 Myanmar migrant workers from diverse occupational backgrounds and 10 Thai informants (see Table 1). The interviews followed up on themes and tensions that emerged in the focus groups, especially those involving sensitive or controversial issues. This method offered a private setting for deeper reflection and personal disclosure and enabled exploration of individual reasoning behind group-level perspectives. Together, focus groups and interviews provided a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research topics. Data collection among migrant workers was facilitated by Myanmar translators. Participant observation further complemented the study, as the researcher took part in religious rituals and community activities in the study areas. This approach enabled direct observation of social interactions and religious expressions in their natural contexts, offering insight into everyday practices, power dynamics, and the lived experiences of both Thai locals and Myanmar migrant workers (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). It also provided contextual information that strengthened the interpretation of data from FGs and in-depth interviews.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

ID	Gender	Age	Nationality	Years in Thailand	Social Role/ Occupation
M1	Male	43	Burmese	22	Factory worker
M2	Male	32	Burmese	10	Factory worker
M3	Male	53	Burmese	26	Wage-earner (seafood processing)
M4	Male	49	Burmese	21	Wage-earner (seafood processing)
M5	Male	36	Burmese	13	Fisherman
M6	Male	42	Burmese	18	Construction worker
M7	Female	29	Burmese	10	Wage-earner (service sector)
M8	Female	47	Burmese	19	Factory worker
M9	Female	25	Burmese	11	Wage-earner (service sector)
M10	Female	34	Burmese	13	Construction worker
M11	Female	50	Burmese	24	Wage-earner (seafood processing)
M12	Male	49	Burmese	25	NGO worker
T13	Female	47	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Community leader
T14	Male	58	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Community leader
T15	Male	63	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Buddhist monk
T16	Male	54	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Buddhist monk
T17	Male	44	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Local resident
T18	Male	35	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Local resident
T19	Female	46	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Local resident
T20	Female	50	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Local resident
T21	Female	62	Thai	Since birth (Native)	Local resident
T22	Female	48	Thai	Since birth (Native)	NGO worker

Data Analysis

Following the guidelines set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis was conducted on the information gathered through participant observation, FGs, and in-depth interviews. A systematic and iterative process was used to identify patterns in the qualitative data. Focus group and interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the data were reviewed thoroughly several times. The dataset underwent manual coding, and the codes were then arranged into categories. Recurring patterns were grouped into prominent themes. Four primary themes arose from this process: (1) experiences of marginalization, (2) religion as a coping mechanism, (3) daily negotiations of identity, and (4) shifting positionality and belonging. These themes were used to structure findings and facilitate subsequent analysis of the data.

Ethical Consideration

The study protocol was approved by Institutional Review Board, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand (COA. No. 2021/10-192). Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants. All the procedures were performed in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Findings

Intersectional Identity: Ongoing Marginalization and Its Evolving Forms

The experiences of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand reflect the ongoing and intersecting forms of marginalization tied to various axes of identity. The findings reveal that these identities are continuously reshaped through political transitions, shifting border regimes, and changing labor and legal frameworks, producing new forms of vulnerability and negotiation over time

Legal and Institutional Precarity

Legal and institutional frameworks in Thailand play a central role in shaping the marginalization of Myanmar migrant workers. Participants consistently reveal how their legal status—whether documented, undocumented, or in between—is not experienced as stable or protective. Instead, it is marked by precarity, surveillance, and conditional recognition, which reinforce their vulnerability and deepen their sense of exclusion. From the perspective of translocational positionality, this legal precariousness is not simply an individual condition, but a relational position shaped by shifting state policies, labor regimes, and transnational political dynamics.

Several long-term migrant workers described their early years in Thailand before formal management of migrant labors from Thailand's neighboring countries were systematically developed as a time of intense fear and invisibility. Their survival depended on remaining unseen, as many participants expressed similar behavior during the focus group discussion: "Whenever we saw a policeman, we ran—even if we had done nothing wrong. We knew we were 'illegal'." Despite the implementation of national irregular migrant management in the mid-2000s, which legalized their statuses, participants underscored that these documents did not eliminate the underlying structures of exclusion. Legal status remained temporary, conditional, and easily revocable, tied to specific employers or sectors, and uncertain policies

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on unskilled migrant workers. The male migrant (M4), who had worked in Thailand for 21 years, shared:

> *My feelings are almost the same. Before, we were illegal and were given temporary work exemptions. We had no power at all, depending on the employer. We are now legal workers, but we still feel uncertain. If the employer doesn't hire us, everything is over. Changing employers or voicing our rights is not something that can be done easily.*

In addition, maintaining legal status involves a complex bureaucratic procedure. Participants described systems of labor registration as confusing, expensive, and heavily reliant on brokers, which often led to new forms of exploitation. Some also highlighted the role of employers and intermediaries in manipulating legal status to retain control over workers.

While individual migrants face direct consequences of their legal status, many participants also pointed to broader systemic gaps in Thailand's migration governance and the push factors related to political instability in their home country. Several interviewees expressed frustration with the inconsistent enforcement of border controls and labor laws, which contributed to a persistent state of legal ambiguity. One male worker (M1) recounted:

> *There're no denying Burmese people have been crossing the border illegally for a long time now — but it's the Thai authorities' job to deal with it. Allowing both legal and illegal workers to co-exist makes us all be lumped together and suspected of being illegal or not. It also gives officials a way to extort money from us when they come to check if we have a card or not. Even if we have a card, we will still be charged for something.*

In this way, legal status is not just a matter of being documented or undocumented—it is a shifting, negotiated position, influenced by political events in Myanmar, migration policy in Thailand, and employer relations. For Myanmar migrant workers, institutional precarity is not merely an administrative challenge; it is a core structure of marginalization.

Economic Exploitation

Myanmar migrant workers also occupied a structurally marginalized position within the labor market. Participants across construction, fisheries, and manufacturing described working conditions involving long hours, low wages, unsafe environments, and a lack of job security, particularly in small- to medium-sized enterprises. They emphasized how employers used legal status and language barriers to justify underpaying or denying fundamental rights. In particular, "in-country registrations" that are based on ad-hoc resolutions by the Thai Cabinet create a loophole in immigration control, which unintentionally allows migrants to enter and exit the country illegally, including migrant workers whose contracts have expired but remain in Thailand, with an undocumented status. This system opens the way for exploitative employment practices. A woman (M11) working as a shrimp peeler explained:

> *My card expired and I haven't renewed it yet, so I can't work at a big factory, but this place hired me anyway. I arrived before sunrise to start my shift, but the pay was low. The boss has never given us gloves or masks, so we must buy both ourselves. When we work a bit long without them, our hands often develop sores, and the skin starts to slough off.*

As part of a broader pattern of systemic neglect and dismissal, one NGO staff member (T22) who works to support migrant workers observed:

> *When accidents happen to migrant workers, some employers evade or take no responsibility. In some factories, when there's a surge in orders,*

> *they quickly bring in more migrant workers. But once the orders stop, they find ways to force them out. It's a pretty unfair practice!*

Despite recognizing their treatment as unfair by Thai labor standards, many workers accepted exploitative conditions as a necessary trade-off when compared to the economic hardships in Myanmar. Several participants acknowledged being paid below the legal minimum wage but still considered their income "good enough" relative to earnings in their home villages. This sense of relative gain reveals a complex negotiation with structural inequality. Migrant workers often do not interpret economic exploitation through a rights-based framework, instead measuring value and justice through transnational comparisons, shaped by prior experiences of poverty, displacement, and limited opportunity. In this way, their positionality is not fixed to a single national context but is shaped across borders, histories, and expectations. Economic exploitation is normalized both by Burmese migrant workers and the Thai labor system and ultimately sustains Thailand's reliance on cheap migrant labor while masking deeper labor issues.

Cultural Devaluation and Stigma

Furthermore, fieldwork findings suggest that Myanmar migrant workers experienced not only legal and economic marginalization, but they also shared a common experience of being subject to prejudice and negative stereotyping within Thai society. These stigmatizing narratives positioned them as inferior, problematic, and often threatening figures. Such discursive constructions not only shaped public perception but also manifested themselves in everyday interactions, shaping the spatial, social, and economic conditions of their lives in Thailand.

Among the local Thais with limited direct interaction with migrant workers, perceptions of Myanmar migrants were largely shaped by media representations. These portrayals often emphasize negative incidents—such as cases of violence, assaults, or fatal attacks on employers, which contribute to widespread suspicion and a sense of insecurity regarding personal safety and property. One Thai woman (T19) reflected on her perception of migrant workers: "Normally, I don't leave the windows open. I'm afraid things will go missing. There are many Myanmar workers around here. We don't know who is good or bad. We must be careful."

The concentration of Myanmar migrant workers in the study areas has contributed to crowded communities and poor housing conditions, though these issues are also shaped by broader structural factors such as inadequate urban planning, limited state support, and discriminatory housing practices. Many Thai respondents associated the presence of migrants with increased solid waste, improper garbage disposal, and dirtiness of public areas, particularly in densely populated areas where migrants reside in shared or informal housing. Some Thai respondents complained about "dumping trash" in public areas and around residential areas of migrant workers or described their neighborhoods becoming "dirtier" after an influx of migrant workers. One local Thai respondent (T17) shared her personal frustration regarding sanitation issues in her neighborhood:

> *There are so many of them living around here now. At first, the streets were super dirty—all red with betel juice stains everywhere. Lately, it's gotten better, but we still see it. Same with the trash, they don't really throw it away properly. But honestly, some Thais do it too! (laughing).*

While a few participants acknowledged that poor infrastructure and municipal waste management also contributed to local sanitation issues, the majority placed the burden of blame squarely on migrant behavior, reinforcing a persistent stereotype of uncleanliness. These stereotypes are not only social but also serve as significant sources of stigma, often amplified

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by public health narratives, particularly those surrounding infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and COVID-19. Migrants were frequently scapegoated as carriers or spreaders of disease. This was evident in the focus group discussions, where most Thai participants agreed with the statement: "During the COVID-19 outbreak, the central shrimp market was a major transmission point because many Myanmar workers were there." Likewise, Myanmar workers also perceived the negative attitudes. As one of Myanmar NGO worker noted, "Thais tend to think that migrants are not as strict about protection as they are, even though we always wear masks when go to the public spaces" (M12, male, 25 yrs in Thailand). Such narratives illustrate how health concerns become racialized, reinforcing a symbolic boundary between the "clean," rule-following citizen and the "risky," disobedient migrant.

In addition, several Thai participants expressed frustration over what they perceived as public disturbances caused by Myanmar migrants, including noise pollution, overcrowding, and congestion in markets or public transportation. Informal settlements and dormitories were often cited as hubs of noise, particularly during evenings and weekends. Statements like "they're always loud, especially at night" or "festivals get packed when they join in" reflected a generalized narrative in which migrants were associated with disrupting public order or peace. Although some of these views were grounded in real experiences, they tended to generalize migrant behavior. For instance, Thai discomfort at festivals was sometimes shaped more by cultural differences (such as language, communication styles, social etiquette), feelings of exclusivity, and perceptions of migrants as outsiders.

Cultural stigma reinforces the marginal position of Myanmar migrants in the host country—not just through exclusion from rights or resources, but through the symbolic framing of their bodies, behaviors, and identities as lower status or even threatening. These symbolic constructions become part of their translocational positionality, shaping not only how others see them, but how they come to see themselves and their place in Thai society. While marginalization constrains many aspects of migrants' lives, it does not fully define their identity navigation. Amid structural exclusion and social stigma, many Myanmar migrants draw upon shared religious traditions, notably Theravada Buddhism, for spiritual support and as a means of adaptation, moral positioning, and subtle resistance within Thai society.

Drawing on Anthias' concept of translocational positionality (e.g., 2001, 2002, 2008), identity is understood not as fixed or singular, but as fluid and negotiated within specific power relations. Within this framework, Buddhist identity, while spiritually meaningful, can also serve as a cultural resource and a strategic claim to legitimacy and belonging in a host society where religion is deeply intertwined with national identity. This intersection of religion and belonging introduces a different layer of perception, complicating how Myanmar migrants are categorized and received within Thai communities.

Religion as Refuge — Emotional Coping and Resilience in Precarity

Buddhism has long been a core cultural and spiritual pillar shaping the identity of the Myanmar people, deeply embedded in their way of life, beliefs, and worldview. The act of migrating abroad for economic opportunities, particularly for migrant workers in Thailand, does not diminish their Buddhist identity. Instead, it transforms into a "mobile identity" that helps them make sense of and emotionally negotiate the precarious and insecure situations in the host society.

Across interviews, participants consistently described religion as a vital source of "refuge" and a key coping mechanism in the face of emotional and psychological precarity. Buddhism helps them "make sense" of the hardships and uncertainties encountered in their daily lives. It provides a framework for interpreting difficult situations, such as subtle cultural conflict, exploitation, or separation from family in their home country. These challenges are

often viewed through the lens of "karma," enabling acceptance and endurance of suffering to a certain extent. As one male worker (M6) shared: "Perhaps it is our bad karma that makes us unable to earn a living in our own country. We must struggle to make a living in other countries." They believed that current hardships result from past actions, and performing good deeds in the present will lead to better outcomes in the future. As one female Myanmar worker (M8) stated: "For us, religion and merit-making are of utmost importance. We have a strong belief that doing good deeds will bring blessings to us now and in the future. We will have a better life."

Religious practice is not merely ritualistic; it is an integral part of their emotional and psychological adaptation, helping Myanmar workers cope effectively with stress, fear, and marginalization. Regular practices, such as chanting or meditation provided moments of tranquility, connected them with their inner faith, cultivated mindfulness and managed negative emotions, and allowed them to seek blessings for protection and inner strength. The Thai temples located near their residences or communities serve as primary spaces for these religious observances.

> *Whenever I feel stressed or upset, I like to come to this temple to pay respects to Buddha and make merit. Every weekend, my friends and I arrange to clean the temple. It's a way to relax and do good deeds. When we feel better, we can fully return to our work. (M9, female, 11 yrs in Thailand, wager in service sector)*

Religious Spaces as Cultural Sanctuaries

Moreover, temples and religious spaces have become significant "sites of translocal connection" for Myanmar migrant workers, where they can be themselves, speak their language, wear traditional dress, and connect with their compatriots. At a temple, they often share experiences and seek emotional support, such as "adjusting their suffering" by discussing work-related challenges and life in Thailand. Furthermore, participating in important Buddhist festivals, such as the end of Buddhist Lent or other significant religious holidays, helped them maintain a connection to their original culture and traditions, even far from home. These activities offered opportunities for celebration, joy, and strengthening bonds among Myanmar workers, fostering a sense of shared community across borders. As one male worker happily recalled:

> *Oh, the end of Buddhist Lent… we were so happy—it was such a joyful time. It's a meaningful day for us to come together and make merit. Women dressed beautifully in Mon or Burmese styles, while men wore traditional sarongs. Normally, we (men) avoid wearing them because Thai people immediately recognize us as Burmese, and it draws unwanted attention from the police. But at the temple, on a day like this, we feel free to fully express who we are. (M2, male, 10 yrs in Thailand, factory worker)*

The Thai Buddhist temples are thus more than just places for religious ceremonies; they are social hubs that alleviate feelings of isolation and alienation. Buddhism serves as a "continuity across dislocation," forming the bedrock of "internal resilience." This resilience enables migrants to adapt and sustain themselves in a host society fraught with challenges. Familiar beliefs and rituals provide a sense of stability and belonging in an unfamiliar environment. As one participant explained:

> *No matter what, I always come to the temple. Even though I only get one day off—Sunday, I still make time for it. Especially on important religious days, we never miss it. It's what we used to do back in*

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> *Myanmar, and we keep doing it here. It makes us feel at home. Even if it's not the same, it brings comfort. It's like we have something to hold on to, without it, we'd feel like we're just floating, uncertain and ungrounded. (M7, female, 10 yrs in Thailand, wage-earner in service sector)*

Consequently, Buddhism, as a "mobile identity," has proven to be a crucial source of psychological refuge and an emotional coping mechanism for Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand. It empowers them to manage stress, fear, and exclusion through religious practice, meaning making from hardship, and anchoring their identity amidst dislocation. This reflects their psychological resilience and adaptability in navigating the precarious circumstances of the host society.

Religious Spaces as Arenas of Agency: Translocational Re-positioning and Quiet

Contestations

Religious spaces in Thailand are not merely sources of spiritual solace or social networks for Myanmar migrant workers; they are pivotal arenas where these workers negotiate marginalization and assert their agency and identity within the host society.

Hybrid Identity Formation

The shared and deeply rooted Buddhist identity among Myanmar migrants and Thai Buddhists facilitates the collaborative design and utilization of religious spaces, involving monks, local Thai residents, and migrant workers. This shared faith serves as a fundamental basis for the formation of a "hybrid identity," fostering a powerful sense of "we-ness" that transcends ethnic boundaries and legal statuses. Religious practices within these spaces often exhibit a seamless blend of traditions, as confirmed by a Thai community leader (T14):

> *They're like us—Buddhists too. On holy days, we go make merit, pray, and chant the same things. We believe in the same teachings. We don't have any religious differences that lead to conflict. That's not really the problem—it's other issues the (Thai) villagers have raised with me.*

Through participant observation by participating in their religious activities, it was found that Myanmar migrant workers maintain their traditional Burmese rituals, such as chanting in the Myanmar language or conducting specific Burmese ceremonies, while simultaneously participating in Thai merit-making activities and temple visits. Several Thai temples have initiated activities that welcome both Thai and Myanmar people, such as sermons delivered in both Thai and Myanmar languages, or inviting monks from Myanmar to participate in religious ceremonies in Thailand. This highlights the degree to which the temple serves as a shared and inclusive space where people connect as fellow Buddhists, while spaces outside the temple do not offer the same sense of acceptance or freedom from discrimination. As in the words of a woman migrant (M11): "The temple made us feel less distant from the Thai people — they treated us kindly After we finished offering food to the monks, a Thai aunt warmly invited us, saying, 'Come, come, let's eat together'." This sense of inclusion and shared identity through religious activities is also reflected in the words of a local monk (T16):

> *During the Buddhist Lent, they organize the ceremony together with a bilingual Dharma sermon activity in both Thai and Burmese styles, just like they always do. They invite monks from both the Thai side and the Burmese side to preach together, so that both Thai people and*

> *Myanmar migrant workers in this area can listen to the Dharma and make merit together.*

Within religious spaces, external social or economic status is often emphasized. Individuals who engage in merit-making or contribute to the upkeep of the religion, regardless of their social class or legal status, are accepted and esteemed as fellow Buddhists. In this context, Myanmar migrant workers can fully participate in the maintenance and propagation of Buddhism without status discrimination, a stark contrast to other social spheres where they might be perceived as marginalized laborers.

Furthermore, new traditions have emerged, blending beliefs and practices from both cultures to suit the context of the migrant community and create a shared cultural space. A clear example is the Songkran Festival, Thailand's New Year celebration, which is also observed in Myanmar as "Thingyan." The organization of Songkran by a temple in Samut Sakhon province vividly illustrates this hybridity, with the temple inviting both Thai people and migrant workers to participate. The event features merit-making activities, bathing Buddha images, and recreational activities, alongside both Myanmar and Thai rituals, often utilizing bilingual chants. Such expressions reflect "hybrid symbols or practices" that demonstrate a non-conflicting dual belonging to both cultures:

> *I come to make merit at this temple for Songkran every year. It's like my home festival in Myanmar. We arrived early in the morning to help clean the temple grounds. In the afternoon, we make merit and bathe the Buddha images. In the evening, there are performances and many stalls selling things. Both Thai and us gather in large numbers, especially in the evening. (M10, female, 13 yrs in Thailand, construction worker)*

This highlights that the openness of Thai people, largely driven by the sentiment of "being fellow Buddhists," fosters a "mutual process" and "symbiosis." Myanmar migrants contribute physical labor and financial resources to support temple activities and Thai Buddhist communities. In return, Thai temples and communities offer a safe space, social support, and opportunities for social networking. This two-way interaction creates a sense of "informal inclusion" within religious spaces. Myanmar migrant workers are not merely temporary residents; they become an integral part of a mutually beneficial social and spiritual ecosystem.

Repositioning from Economic Marginality to Moral-Economic Actors

In the context of migration, Myanmar migrant workers are not merely passive subjects or victims of unjust structures. They actively utilize religion as a symbolic, moral, and material tool for quiet resistance against marginalization and oppression. Positionalities shift when migrants invoke sacred authority or dignity to confront structural violence. Myanmar migrant workers reposition their identity from one marked by economic deprivation and moral suspicion to that of "moral-economic actors," who assert economic agency while embodying values of generosity, community, and spiritual merit.

Field observations revealed that temples located near Myanmar migrant communities were well maintained and recently restored. Both local monks and Thai community members consistently noted that "they are very diligent in donating" and that "the money used for repairs and construction mostly come from the donations of Myanmar workers." The ability of Myanmar migrant workers to donate money to support religious activities clearly demonstrates their economic capability. Through their merit-making practices, they demonstrate economic agency. They possess enough resources and can donate without personal inconvenience, subtly countering assumptions that they are economically struggling or socially burdensome. This display of affluence helps to rectify negative stereotypes, transforming their image from one

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often associated with being underprivileged or even linked to violence, such as "brutal" or "employer-killers," into a more positive perception within Thai society.

> *We can't see Burmese people the same way anymore. Just look at how they make merit. Just look at how they make merit—one glance at those massive pagodas and you can tell how much money they've donated. When they gather to make merit, they often donate more money to the temple than we do—it honestly puts us Thais to shame. (T21, female, a Thai local resident)*

These financial contributions and religious activities by Myanmar migrant workers enhance their individual and collective image while underscoring their integral role in Thailand's economic development. This is evident through their spending, donations, and participation in various economic activities, a contribution that the broader national system increasingly acknowledges and accepts. A Thai vendor selling goods at a temple in Samut Sakhon province (T20) attested to this mutual benefit: "It's good because they come and generate income for our country. We also benefit—I get to sell things to them (Myanmar workers) here, so Thai vendors earn income too."

From Margins to Supporters

The power of their religious faith has led them to undergo a "positionality shift" from disadvantaged to "supporters." Making merit is already ingrained in their beliefs, and working in Thailand for a period has given them the financial means to help their compatriots. They initiated donations for educational funds for monks, novices, and children of fellow Myanmar migrant workers. They also send money and various essential items back to their home country to aid the poor and those affected by political threats. As expressed by a late middle-aged man: "Besides, donating money to cover expenses for religious activities, the money we donate also goes to support temple construction, provide scholarships for monks, and help those affected by the unrest in Myanmar." (M3, male, 26 yrs in Thailand, wager in seafood processing)
These actions reflect their continued bond with their homeland and their sense of responsibility toward their original society, simultaneously affirming their enhanced social and economic status. This new role highlights their capacity to aid and create positive impacts on both the host society and their country of origin.

> *The temples around here survive because of Burmese people who come to make merit. From a temple that used to be overgrown with only a few Thais coming to make merit, Burmese people helped build this and that until the temple became much larger. Before, there was only a small hall; now there are many large halls. (T18, male, a Thai local resident).*

Religious spaces emerge as powerful arenas where Myanmar migrants quietly negotiate their social position and challenge dominant narratives. Through shared practices, migrants cultivate hybrid identities that both align with Thai Buddhist norms and affirm their distinct cultural background. Their visible contributions enable a shift from economic marginality to moral-economic agency. These subtle yet meaningful contestations, rooted in religious life, reveal the temple not only as a site of spiritual refuge but also as a platform for dignity, recognition, and the redefinition of migrant identity in both the host and home contexts.

Religion: Belonging and the (Re)Creation of Home

The analysis also suggests that religion plays a central role in maintaining spiritual practices and in reconstructing a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar and often exclusionary environment. Temples and religious activities provide more than ritual continuity; they allow

migrants to recreate aspects of their homeland, fostering both individual comfort and collective identity amid dislocation and marginalization.

Field observations revealed that many Buddhist temples near Myanmar migrant communities were constructed or renovated to incorporate Burmese architectural elements and symbolic motifs, such as traditional fretwork, Burmese-style Buddha images, and icons like the swan, a cultural symbol of the Mon people. Although Thailand and Myanmar share a Theravada Buddhist tradition, the artistic expression of Buddhism in each reflects distinct cultural identities. Incorporating familiar forms from migrants' homeland enabled acts of spatial and cultural re-rooting, recreating a tangible sense of home in a foreign land. These design choices helped shape culturally meaningful spaces that support spiritual practice and cultural continuity, offering a sense of belonging amid broader experiences of marginalization. This sense of recreating home through religious space was clearly expressed by one migrant who recalled:

> *We raised money to renovate the shrine and other parts of the temple. We thought, if we're going to fix it, why not make it look like it does back home in Burma? That way, it feels like we're worshipping just like we used to at home. We asked the abbot for permission, and he said, 'It's your donation—if this is what your faith wants, I won't stand in the way. (M5, male, 13 yrs in Thailand, fisherman)*

Through the replication of architectural styles, rituals, and aesthetic symbols from Myanmar, migrants create tangible sites of cultural continuity in the host land. These temples offer not only spiritual refuge, but a recreated sense of "home" that affirms belonging on migrants' own terms. By anchoring themselves in these familiar spaces, migrants reposition their social presence: no longer merely transient or invisible laborers, but cultural agents and community builders. In this way, temples become strategic responses to exclusion, allowing migrants to symbolically assert their existence, claim visibility, and sustain a sense of collective self in a context that otherwise renders them peripheral.

Furthermore, pagodas modeled after Myanmar's iconic Shwedagon Pagoda have become a common feature in temples located near Burmese migrant communities in Thailand. Over time, their size has noticeably increased—as one participant (M3) noted, "the larger the pagoda, the stronger the faith." Constructing replicas of the Shwedagon Pagoda represents more than religious devotion; it is an act of "place-making" and a powerful assertion of cultural and religious identity within the host society. The Shwedagon is a deeply symbolic structure, linking religion with the emotional concept of "home," and carries profound meaning for migrant workers. As one participant expressed:

> *The pagoda is very important to us. When we see the pagoda, it's like seeing Burmese people. We built it so that people who pass by will know that we are here, and even our children and later generations will remember. (M6, male, 18 yrs in Thailand, construction worker)*

A replica Shwedagon Pagoda within a Thai temple, not only demonstrates their profound faith but also symbolizes their establishment and creation of a spiritual "home" in the new land. From being "invisible" in Thai society, they become "visible" through these stable and permanent religious symbols. This enables them to participate in rituals and activities alongside Thais as "co-creators," reflecting their elevated status.

> *Their religious network is strong. They can raise large donations and are passionate about building pagodas. When we see a Shwedagon-style pagoda, we know that many Myanmar people usually come to this temple. Look at the top (of the pagoda)—it's covered with valuables. They bring gold necklaces, rings, rubies… all kinds of offerings to make merit. Placing them at the top of the pagoda is believed to bring the*

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highest merit. Their faith is truly admirable. (T20, female, a Thai local resident)

The increasing involvement of Myanmar migrant workers in temple decision-making highlights their growing acceptance as active members of the religious community, thereby enhancing their social standing. In many temples hosting religious festivals, migrant workers have opportunities to co-organize events alongside Thai community members. Festival dates are often adjusted to accommodate migrant workers' availability, reflecting their growing involvement in local religious life. Based on participatory observation during Kahtein robe-offering ceremonies, both Thai and migrant participants contributed to organizing and leading the event. The procession—featuring the ceremonial "money trees"—included Thai attendees in traditional Thai dress walking alongside Myanmar migrants wearing ethnic costumes. Moving together in a shared procession around the chapel, these moments symbolize more than religious devotion: they reflect a form of belonging forged through shared ritual practice, where cultural difference was not erased but expressed in harmony. Such religious participation serves to soften social boundaries between migrants and locals, fostering "a sense of inclusion" and "mutual recognition" within temple spaces.

However, at the practical level, and particularly concerning religion, the host society demonstrates a capacity to flexibly adjust its boundaries due to a shared Buddhist identity. This shared identity serves as a crucial bridge, helping to lower social barriers and allowing Myanmar migrants to gain space and acceptance within the religious dimension. Yet, at the policy and public level, there are ongoing debates regarding approaches to managing transnational populations, where boundaries often remain non-negotiable, especially about economic integration and political mobilization.

In conclusion, religious practice provides Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand with a vital platform to foster psychological and emotional resilience and adaptation within the host society. It facilitates cultural bonding, allows them to strategically negotiate their status, and promotes a sense of belonging. These workers occupy "fluid positions" between cultures, not rigidly fixed as "fully Burmese" or "fully Thai." Their religious engagements enable them to explicitly express their identity and agency, transforming their experience from mere "otherness" into a more complex transnational existence as dignified and integral members of their new society.

Discussion

This research sets out to explore how Myanmar migrant workers experience marginalization shaped by the intersection of their social identities and migrant status, and how their shared religious identity with the Thai majority supports them in navigating such marginalization. Our findings highlight that the marginalization of Myanmar migrant workers cannot be explained by a single aspect of identity. Rather, it is produced through intersecting axes that position migrants within overlapping systems of subordination. The study also underscores the fluidity of identities across different social, spatial, and temporal contexts, illustrating how migrants' positions shift as they navigate multiple environments and power structures. Notably, this research represents an early attempt to apply the concept of translocational positionality to the intersectional identities and marginalization of migrant workers in the context of Thailand. These results extend prior literature by demonstrating that shared religion identity becomes a flexible resource to negotiate inclusion and soften the edges of marginality, though it does not fully erase structural exclusion. In addition, this study contributes to the growing body of migration research on the lived experiences of migrant workers and their marginalization within the Southeast Asian context, a region whose distinct dynamics differ from the typical Global South–North labor migration flows.

This research demonstrates that Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand occupy a complex and shifting position of marginalization, shaped by the intersection of multiple social identities, including migrant status, legal precarity, nationality, and cultural background. Rather than treating "migrant" as a fixed or homogenous category, this study aligns with Anthias' (2008) critique of essentialism, which cautions against viewing identities as static or singular. The workers' experiences of legal and institutional vulnerability, economic exploitation, and cultural stigmatization emerge not from any one identity marker, but from the intersecting and context-dependent nature of their positioning within broader power structures. Similar findings are evident in Miles et al. (2019), whose study on women migrant workers in Malaysia reveals how gender, legal status, nationality, and labor identity intersect, but are often unevenly addressed within advocacy efforts. They point out how specific identities, such as "being a worker," can overshadow others, reinforce essentialist approaches, and hinder progress in intersectional advocacy. Comparable intersections are also evident among Sri Lankan female immigrants in London (Hapugoda Achchi Kankanamge, 2022). These studies support a post-intersectional perspective that resists reductive identity labels and instead highlights how marginalization is relational, fluid, and shaped by the interplay of structural and institutional dynamics.

This current study also underscores that transnational forces are a key driver of the marginalization experienced by Myanmar migrants, operating alongside—but often intensifying—local and institutional factors. Migrants' social positions are fluid and contextually shaped, influenced by the political instability and economic deterioration in Myanmar, the legal ambiguity and the migration policy landscape in Thailand, and power relations in everyday labor settings. These intersecting conditions contribute to a climate where even legally documented migrants face surveillance and suspicion. Our findings reinforce the view that marginalization is transnationally constituted and relational, rather than fixed or solely determined by national policies. Our study is consistent with the study on Myanmar domestic workers in Singapore (Ho & Ting, 2022), which shows that they are marginalized through the multiple intersections of identity and transnational dynamics, as both Myanmar and Singapore fail to provide adequate protections, pushing them into invisible and precarious conditions. This highlights how state inaction across borders co-produces vulnerability.

In addition, one of the key findings of this study is that religious resemblance serves as a strategic and symbolic resource through which Myanmar migrant workers navigate their marginalized status. Their shared Theravada Buddhist identity with the Thai majority provides a sense of moral belonging, cultural familiarity, and access to religious spaces. Religious spaces are asserted as important platforms for repositioning and subtly resisting their marginalized status. Through religious practices, Myanmar migrant workers manage to cope with legal and economic challenges, build safe cultural spaces, shift their economic and moral positions, and cultivate a sense of belonging and a new 'home' within Thailand. Their donation to religious activities is more than just a demonstration of strong faith. Rather, it is a powerful way for them to push back against being devalued and negatively stereotyped. They can essentially transform their standing from simply being 'disadvantaged individuals' into "supporters" who hold a moral and economic sway within the community. This reflects the translocational nature of their positioning—how individuals shift emphasis across identity markers depending on the social and institutional terrain they are navigating (Anthias, 2002, 2008).

Religious resemblance has also been found to play a significant role in facilitating cultural adaptation among Muslim migrant workers from Indonesia and Bangladesh in Malaysia (Enh et al, 2024). Sharing the Islamic faith with the host society contributes to more favorable social interactions and strengthens migrants' sense of belonging. By foregrounding the shared faith, the study highlights that common religious ground can serve as a non-

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economic, cultural asset for integration, even when structural barriers remain high due to their migrant status and ethnicity.

Furthermore, religion serves as more than a powerful strategy by which Myanmar migrant workers negotiate and transform their marginalized status. It also functions as a spiritual refuge and fosters a sense of "belonging" and "making a home" that transcends national boundaries and legal status. This is particularly evident in the renovation of Buddhist temples with Myanmar architectural and symbolic elements, reflecting efforts to create cultural spaces connected to their origins. This finding aligns with translocality concept, which posits that people can create and maintain a sense of belonging in new places by connecting with their origins through cultural practices (Anthias, 2001; Fernández de la Reguera, 2022; Sopapol & Cadchumsang, 2019). This realization emphasizes that religion functions as more than just a belief system; it is also a space for identity formation, group integration, and social status negotiation in new environments.

However, although sharing a religious identity with most of the host country helps migrants manage challenges and build community and identity, this dynamic is noteworthy when discussing immigrants who hold a religious identity different from that of the majority in the destination country. In contrast, religious intersecting marker often exacerbates marginalization, a pattern well-documented in studies of Muslims in Europe (Di Stasio et al., 2019). Moreover, visible religious practices or intense religiosity can make migrants more vulnerable to discrimination, which, in turn, affects their integration and mental health (Bender et al., 2022). However, Fleischmann and Khoudja (2023) found in their study on religious change among Christian and Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands that religious differences initially hindered integration into mainstream society, but this trend became a steady linear decline over time with longer stays in the receiving society.

Despite these contributions, it is also essential to consider the limitations inherent in this study. The first limitation is that qualitative research may not be generalizable to a larger population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the study did not examine sub-ethnic or other religious differences among Myanmar migrant workers that may have affected their experiences. Building on the current findings, future research could apply a comparative, cross-regional approach to investigate Buddhist migrant communities in contexts outside Southeast Asia by examining how translocational positionality operates across different political, cultural, and religious environments. This would help determine whether the patterns identified in the current study are context-specific or whether they reflect more general dynamics within global migration.

Authors Contributions

The corresponding author conceived and led the research project, conducted the research, and managed the overall research process. The first author participated in conducting the research as a project researcher and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to writing, revising, and approving the final version of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent form

Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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