

Cattle Hotels and Infrastructures of Care

Jiraporn Laocharoenwong

The porous Thailand–Myanmar border has plenty of natural crossing points, which historically have enabled unofficial movements of goods and people (Van Schendel and De Maaker 2014). Yet it is not only humans and goods but also animals that cross. Each month, a steady stream of ten to twenty thousand cattle crosses the Moei River from Myanmar to Mae Sot in Thailand. On the Thai side, they have their health checked, are vaccinated and normally stay in quarantine for fifteen days. The twelve animal-quarantine stations as designated by the Department of Livestock along this part of the border are colloquially referred to as ‘cattle hotels’ (โรงแรมวัว).

In China, a growing affluent urban middle class has shifted towards a more protein-rich diet (Hansen and Gale 2014). A shortage of domestic supply to cater to this demand has driven a surge in beef imports. While imports of pre-cut premium beef for steaks from Australia or the Americas use well-documented supply chains, the cheaper beef that is typical of so many Chinese dishes, such as hotpot, stir-fries and noodle soups, is mostly imported as live cattle from Southeast Asia and then slaughtered in China.

In Myanmar, oxen used to work the fields until democratic elections in 2010 heralded a period of rapid economic growth (ADB 2012). Mechanization of agriculture caused the retirement of large herds of cattle. Matching surplus cattle to demand for beef in China, traders established several routes directly from Myanmar to China, or via Thailand (Smith et al. 2015). Not officially condoned for export in Myanmar and not officially sanctioned for import in China either – and notably also running through areas in Myanmar under the control of various ethnic armed groups – these trade routes are largely illegal but “licit,” or “what people involved in transnational networks consider to be legitimate” (Abraham and Van Schendel 2005: 4). The Myanmar-to-China routes, however, proved problematic and their use has diminished. Even when the Myanmar government experimented with legalizing cattle exports in 2017, its designated route via the Muse–Ruili border crossing involved so much bureaucracy and uncertain passage through the territory of the Wa ethnic group that many official traders reverted back to the unofficial trade routes (Htoon 2020).

With their origins largely in Myanmar, cattle travel via Thailand and Laos to their destinations in China, and to a lesser extent Vietnam. Including time spent in quarantine and at fattening stations, the entire route can take around three to four months. Based on ethnographic research in Mae Sot, this article focuses on cattle hotels and their position in the larger beef supply chain and ruminant trade that spans Southeast Asia.

This ox, part of a herd of a hundred cattle, was transported from the temporarily closed Myanmar–China border crossing south to another crossing at the Myanmar–Thailand border.
Photo: Jiraporn Laocharoenwong, 2022.



Because of the overall safer route and superior veterinary care in Thailand, Mae Sot has established itself as a central node in this trade, and its position has gained in importance over the past decade. It has become a chokepoint, where cattle must pass many health checks as part of strict animal disease control, and a major waiting area, where cattle and their traders have to spend ‘idle’ time due to the quarantine requirements. Cattle hotels, facilitating all these elements of control, waiting and care, have become an essential infrastructure of cattle trade routes from Myanmar to China.

Cattle Hotels and Food Infrastructures

Research into food supply chains as a type of infrastructure foregrounds that which is often taken for granted or largely invisible. The notion of “food infrastructures” (Penders et al. 2014) suggests the need to go beyond mere issues of supply, demand and markets. It prompts the exploration of implicit assumptions about what is safe or proper regarding storage, packaging and transport of food over long distance. It also interrogates the institutional arrangements and regulatory requirements involved.



A cattle hotel is built as a roofed animal pen, with designated areas for storage and veterinary inspection. Baan Rai cattle hotel.

Photo: Jiraporn Laocharoenwong, 2022.

For the live cattle trade another infrastructural aspect is crucial, because live commodities cannot simply be stored in a warehouse, nor can they be transported as fresh produce or packaged goods: they require care. Cattle hotels in Mae Sot form a nexus where food infrastructure, control and care fuse together. Having worked in the field, some cattle arrive scrawny or sick. During quarantine here, before being transported to resource-rich ‘fattening’ (ꨀꨣꨩꨣꨩ) areas further inside Thailand, cattle can be fed and cured, and also made legal. When they enter Thailand, the livestock are declared ‘dead’ (ꨀꨣꨩꨣꨩ)

ทำให้ตาย) in Myanmar, as if slaughtered, and are ‘reborn’ (ซุบชีวิตใหม่) in Thailand, officially changing nationality from Burmese to Thai, with all the required documents. In order to obtain these documents, which allow traders to move cattle out of the border area and resume their journey, the Thai authorities require stringent health controls for all livestock – stipulations that were first introduced in 1995 to combat foot-and-mouth disease. This entails a significant amount of bureaucracy, which is difficult to navigate for both Myanmar and Thai traders.



Pun, a cattle hotel owner and former headman of Baan Rai Village, maintains good connections with both Thai authorities and several ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, through which he can arrange safe transport for cattle through insurgency areas, as well as facilitate customs checks and other dealings with bureaucracy for traders. Pun recognized that Mae Sot had become a node of connection in the trans-border cattle trade, where traders from Myanmar, Thailand, and occasionally observers from Vietnam and China come together. Sensing a business opportunity, Pun, and later others like him, started to offer more and more services facilitating the cattle's required longer stay, setting up cattle pens with a veterinarian on-site, providing fodder, clean water and hay for bedding. Thus, the term cattle hotel was coined.

Oxen sleeping in the Wang Takien cattle hotel.

Photo: Jiraporn
Laocharoenwong, 2022.

All cattle hotels are private businesses. They compete in terms of the range of services offered, and in their effectiveness in organizing the border crossing itself. The details of the crossing vary, too. In some cases, the animals ford the river; in others, they walk onto a metal raft that brings them from the Myanmar to the Thai side. In yet others, a Myanmar truck will drive onto the raft and unload cattle at the Thai side right at the cattle hotel.



Metal raft on which the cattle cross the Moei River.

Photo: Jiraporn Laocharoenwong, 2022.

An Infrastructure of Disease Control, Waiting and Care

In early 2021, an outbreak of lumpy skin disease in Thailand caused thousands of cattle deaths (Arjkumpa et al. 2021). As a result, Thailand suspended cattle trade with Myanmar for a year. When trade resumed in 2022, even stricter livestock import laws were imposed along with a requirement for twenty-eight days of quarantine, instead of the usual fifteen.

These changes in disease control severely affected the cross-border economies, which employ not only the cattle traders and cattle hotel owners, but also other economic actors in several countries. These include diverse groups such as truck drivers, farmers and hay providers, companies operating fattening areas in Thailand, and boatmen transporting cattle from Laos into China. When trade resumed, more than five thousand cattle from all over Myanmar were waiting to cross the Thai border into Mae Sot each week. To resolve this congestion, cattle hotels had to enlarge their areas, expand services and update their licenses accordingly.

For cattle hotels, this meant more stress on their capacity. Additional complications occur if an animal gets ill: it cannot leave quarantine and it must be separated from the other animals. Some may die and need to be disposed of. It requires more capital investments, too, in terms of vaccination, shelter, fodder and payment for the workers. As extra services, hotels provided healthy formulas of concentrated and roughage feed, and care for the cattle's hoofs, since the animals have to stand for a long time and travel far.



During their twenty-eight days of waiting, cattle are looked after by ‘cattle sitters’ (คนเลี้ยงวัว). Their role is to provide fodder and water, clean the pens, take oxen out of their pen for a walk, and administer medicine and food supplements to keep them healthy. Most cattle sitters are ethnic Mon or Karen or other undocumented migrant workers from Myanmar, often with a family background in farming. Thong, a Mon cattle sitter, used to work as a wall painter in a suburb of Bangkok, but lost his job due to Covid-19. He initially came to Mae Sot on his way back to Myanmar, but the border was closed. He found a job as a sitter, where he typically takes care of about thirty to forty oxen at any one time. In an interview in February 2022 at Wang Takien cattle hotel, he described his duties as follows:

A cattle sitter, a trader and a veterinarian preparing vaccines.

Photo: Jiraporn Laocharoenwong, 2022.

I check the cattle every day. If an animal doesn't eat or drink, I examine its tongue and wash it with salt water. A very sick ox, I will separate from its herd. Cattle are social animals, they need friends. Otherwise they feel lonely, refuse to eat and may even die. In the evening I hang mosquito nets. I also sleep in the cattle pen.

Amid stringent control by Thai authorities, long cattle queues at the border, impatient traders, and conflicts between time-to-market and extended waiting times, everyone is aware that cattle themselves can become a carrier for infectious diseases, making various adjustments necessary. It is the porosity of the Thailand–Myanmar borderland which in the first place allowed the opening up of unofficial crossing points for this international trade. Yet in this borderland it is the Mae Sot cattle hotels that sustain this trade, offering important services in the field of control, waiting and care, and which are themselves part of a broader food infrastructure spanning multiple countries.

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