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The 'Good' Employer

Mutual Expectations amidst Changing Employment Situations in Pathein, Myanmar

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Introduction

Myanmar has recently been experiencing far-reaching economic changes. While a market-led economy had already been introduced in the early 1990s (albeit with continuing state control over key sectors), the political changes since 2011 had increased the pace and extent of change considerably. Despite overall economic growth, the country has become increasingly characterized by stratification on the basis of wealth. While the economic changes have benefited some, a considerable number of people have been left behind in an intensifying struggle to balance income and expenditure amidst rising prices for basic goods and land.

This chapter is based on ethnographic research in Pathein, a medium-size town in lowland Myanmar. In my research, I explore the links between morality and economic thoughts and actions in Pathein, focusing mainly on the owners of small businesses.[1] I look firstly at people's attitudes concerning the respective merits of self-employment versus low-status employment, and secondly at relations between employers and non-family workers.[2] I describe the influence of the first on the second. I begin by underlining the importance of values, in the form of widespread attitudes and ideas of what is desirable here in economic matters, particularly emphasizing the preference for autonomy among potential workers. I identify this preference as one factor that contributes to a high labour turnover, which can force employers to take their responsibilities seriously and make concessions. This indicates how economic activities and therefore realities are influenced by the values people hold and by their moral

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considerations, an observation that constitutes common ground for all ideas of 'moral economy'.

Secondly, I shift my focus to workplace relations and deal more specifically with the type of 'moral economy' described by James Carrier (2018: 24). Here, a specific form of economic interaction between people, in this case employer and workers, entails a moral force that has more to do with obligations than with values (ibid.: 23). While a lot has happened to the concept of 'moral economy' since its emergence, this obligation-focused understanding comes close to the original contributions (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976). It understands culturally shared assumptions as being related to the issue of how the parties involved should behave and which reciprocal duties exist between them. These assumptions have been shaped by a history of economic transactions between specific people and groups. If such expectations are disappointed, a person's behaviour might be regarded as immoral.

Analysing such relationships allows me to show the place of considerations of moral economy in its dialectical relationship with the realities of the labour market. It is cases in which these expectations confront changing economic realities that are of interest here. Moral and social factors are often overlooked in conventional economic analyses, yet we know that all economies remain 'embedded' in social relations (Polanyi 2001 [1944]; Gudeman 2008), even if they do not always result in a visible moral outrage like the eighteenth-century English working-class protests discussed by E.P. Thompson (1971).

Clearly, workplace relationships are marked by hierarchies and inequalities between employers and workers, with moral expectations facing both sides. Below, I outline how these expectations shape the unequal relationships between employers and workers and their activities. What strategies do employers implement to attract and keep workers? What characterizes a 'good employer' according to the workers, and what happens when these ideas clash with new formalized employment situations of the sort one finds in large, foreign-owned garment factories? To make comprehensible the basis on which workers and employers raise their expectations and implement their actions, I start with a common problem repeatedly voiced by owners of small businesses: the difficulty of finding suitable workers.

Autonomy and Work

Myanmar has seen a process of urbanization, with large numbers of people from the rural region surrounding Pathein migrating directly to Yangon, bypassing the provincial capital. Smaller towns like Pathein in particular do

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not yet offer many new and attractive employment opportunities to absorb these rural migrants. Owners of small businesses complain regularly how increasingly difficult it is to find workers, especially those who are reliable and willing to work for long periods in the same business. This problem does not apply only to small businesses. After 2011 and the apparent 'opening up' of the country, Myanmar was branded an attractive location for investors. Given the country's large and youthful labour force, prospects seemed promising for factory owners – for example, in the garment sector – in what some called 'Asia's final frontier' (Parker 2016). However, just like local small businesses, the big new garment factories found themselves struggling with high labour turnovers, regardless of the fact that they were offering workers regular employment and high wages[3] (for data confirming this observation, see the large-scale surveys of DEval 2015, CSO & UNDP 2015, Bernhardt et al. 2017). Why was that?

The situation of a high labour turnover going hand in hand with work-related disillusionment is not a problem specific to Myanmar and has been described for other transitional contexts as well (e.g. Morris and Hinz 2018: 250 on Russia; also Carswell and De Neve 2018: 314 on India). In Pathein, workers or potential workers found that the available employment options often not only pay less but also bring no more structural benefits compared to small-scale self-employment. While it is not uncommon for employers to support their workers to a certain extent beyond their wages (see below), there is no functioning state-run social-security system for most private-sector employees, meaning that employment does not bring them any benefits such as state-organized pensions, unemployment benefits, parental leave and the like. However, apart from the purely economic aspects, there is also a dimension of values at play here, in interaction with economic conditions. To shed light on this, I describe the commonly shared attitudes of those who could potentially work in factories and small businesses but have opted for small-scale self-employment instead. I analyse this phenomenon through the concept of autonomy and argue that it is partly due to a preference for autonomy among many potential workers that business owners find it difficult to find and keep workers. When talking about small-scale self-employment, I refer to those whom the Myanmar census classifies as 'own account workers',[4] including all those who run a one-person workshop or stall, mobile vendors, and trishaw and motorcycle taxi-drivers. One of them is Ko Ko.

I observed Ko Ko a couple of times pushing his wooden cart loaded with six plastic containers along the sandy roads near Shwezigone Pagoda in central Pathein. He filled the containers with water from a well in the monastic compound and sold it to people on the road or on their doorsteps. Ko Ko was in his forties and lived together with his wife May Wah and their

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nineteen-year-old son in a simple, one-storey, half-open wooden house in one of Pathein's northern wards. Ko Ko never complained, but I knew that he could barely make ends meet. While his wife, who produced and sold small pottery items, was originally from Pathein, Ko Ko had grown up in a township south of Pathein. His entire family had 'gone with "Nargis"', as he put it, referring to the devastating cyclone of 2008. Ko Ko and his wife owned a tiny piece of land on which their house stood, but they had no savings. They had been able to let their son finish high school and start a course at Pathein University. However, in a later phase of my fieldwork, they confirmed that they had asked him to suspend his university education, to his great disappointment, as they needed him to find work and contribute to the family income. The Chinese-brand motorbike they had recently purchased on credit would take them many months to repay. However, they felt they needed a motorbike for transportation; for example, for visits to the doctor or to buy groceries in areas where the prices were lower than in the small market next to their home.

'Our neighbour's daughter has started to work in the industry park,' Ko Ko told me while pushing his cart, referring to the large garment factories on the edge of the town. He continued:

> She cannot rest when she feels tired. She cannot go home when her child needs her. She cannot even take a few minutes to go to the toilet sometimes. Because the employer does not arrange transport, she loses a part of her income in paying for transportation to the factory in the morning and back home again in the evening. Actually, she is already thinking about quitting again.

Ko Ko liked to decide for himself when to work and when to rest. He would sit down in the shade of a tree when the afternoon sun got too hot or when the rain started pouring down in the monsoon season. 'We are not educated. We do not have many options,' he said, describing his economic and social standing in society. For him, prestigious and secure occupations, such as government administration, engineering or medicine, were out of reach. He could only choose between various local low-income, low-status jobs, such as factory work, carrying salt bags, unloading ships and stocking shelves in corner stores. Instead, he opted for small-scale self-employment and had been selling water to people for several years. This was one of the few things he had the power to decide over. After all, self-employment allowed him to maintain a certain autonomy. He added a moral dimension to his work by saying: 'Water is pure. And important.[5] In my work, I don't break any rules, I do not need to engage in any illicit activities.'

The option of self-employment was especially viable for worker-residents in Pathein who stayed in the area. They were familiar with the available options, had a place to stay and were linked in networks, which made it

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easier for them to engage in small-scale self-employment. Migrants from the surrounding countryside, in contrast, were more likely to take on jobs in factories, the shipyards or small businesses. They had no networks and were more reliant on shelter provided by their employers. This indicates that people's choices cannot be assessed without taking into account their very real economic options and constraints.

Nevertheless, the preference for autonomy was also present among many who were currently engaged in employment. I visited a group of women who were working in Pathein's recently established large garment factories, and they all expressed a clear wish to open their own sewing businesses once they had enough money and experience. While the garment factories offered stable and relatively high wages, workers reportedly suffered from subordination to supervisors, combined with other negatively perceived aspects of their work. One elderly local woman, whose two daughters had gone to Yangon, one working as a housemaid, the other in a factory, replied to my question about which daughter had the better job: 'It's the same. Both have to work for someone else.' To her, the defining feature of these very different jobs was the element of subordination.

The topic of autonomy has been addressed specifically in relation to communities in Southeast Asia (see Sopranzetti 2017 on Thailand). Specifically for Myanmar, Michael Adas has commented on the colonial economy, in which industry was dominated by Europeans, Chinese and Indians. According to his studies, this was not only due to the systematic exclusion of Burmans by their rulers, as in many cases Burmans themselves apparently favoured agriculture over industrial occupations in the cities; partly because the latter were regarded as low status, while farmers, at least those who owned the land they worked, could remain their own masters in the countryside (Adas 2011 [1974]: 120). A loss of autonomy in urban industrial tasks was linked here to a loss of social status.

In my observations, the reluctance of workers to subordinate themselves to a boss – that is, the value of autonomy (in Burmese: *lu'la'hmu.*) – functions here mostly in the sense of self-determination. This self-determination must be analysed with reference to other factors surrounding it and its different possible purposes. When we talk of people who can potentially be hired as non-family workers in businesses, we are usually dealing with those for whom higher formal education and prestigious employment seem way out of reach, who are often struggling to make ends meet, many of them facing indebtedness. When informants talked about themselves, they would generally mention their origins (rural or urban), religion and ethnicity (e.g. Karen, Burman or Chinese) and add fairly quickly what they studied (whether it played a role in their current work or not) or state that they are 'not educated' (*pyinya ma' ta' bhu:*). This way of identifying and

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classifying oneself functioned almost as a label of one's social standing, as well as an assessment of one's opportunities. Among such people, who feel they have almost no opportunity for upward mobility, opting for small-scale self-employment over working for someone else can give them more freedom, pleasure and dignity.

To disentangle the value dimension further here, it is necessary to differentiate between several aspects of autonomy in the context of work that can be grouped roughly into matters of flexibility and matters of dignity. To understand which of these aspects are at play, we must ask, for each specific situation, autonomy from what or whom, and for what purpose? As indicated by Ko Ko at the beginning of the chapter, choosing self-employment over employment offers people more control over their tasks and time, and hence the freedom and flexibility to fulfil individual desires (such as resting on a hot afternoon). With this flexibility, people are able to respond more easily to the demands of relatives or emergencies, such as caring for a sick child, thus offering what Kathleen Millar (2014) calls 'relational autonomy', which reminds us of the fact that a preference for autonomy cannot be equated with a general avoidance of social obligations. This had relevance especially for women, who are primarily in charge of caring for children and the elderly. Choices, even if shaped by underlying values, are, after all, always embedded in social expectations, of which gendered care obligations are one example. In Pathein, many women worked from home so as to be able to look after their children. They made fans from leaves, sold snacks from their houses, or worked at small-scale crafts.

The aspects mentioned above are related to flexibility. Analytically, we must distinguish them from another important issue when looking at people's preference for autonomy: the lack of willingness to obey a superordinate in the workplace. This is important not only for reasons of pleasure but also of status. It speaks to Ward Keeler's understanding of autonomy as a key value in Myanmar's Buddhist population, which he sees as an attempt by people to avoid the problems and demands that arise in locally prevalent hierarchical social relations (2017). However, in work matters, autonomy is not generally the option that brings more dignity and higher status. Here, we need to differentiate between different economic groups and the respective conditions they face. That became clear already when I referred to the different options for migrants versus local residents in Pathein, but it applies to other differences as well. It should be noted that, if someone is well educated and has the chance of prestigious and stable employment, he is likely to enter into highly hierarchical work relations, such as in the public sector. After all, 'doing business' is regarded as rather ambivalent and does generally not seem to entail much prestige among Burmans (see also Keyes 1990, on Thailand) and people are willing to give up autonomy (and

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even income) for more prestigious positions and social upward-mobility, if possible. Thus, although widespread, self-employment is rather an economic necessity than an occupational dream for many because respectable and well-paid employment is rare. However, as mentioned earlier, among those with no access to prestigious employment, the avoidance of subordination can increase their feelings of dignity (*thei'ka*).

Such layered observations show how the meaning of a specific value like autonomy varies across classes, reminding us that values must always be studied within the context of people's specific socio-economic situations and the opportunities and constraints these entail. For the many for whom prestigious jobs were out of reach, working for someone else in low-paying, low-status jobs was seen as further degradation. I encountered several people who migrated for work, to the city or even abroad, and had only dared to inform their parents once they had reached their destination. The kinds of jobs awaiting them were linked to feelings of shame, from which they tried to spare their parents, while still asserting autonomy in the realm of the family by going on these journeys without seeking parental consent.

The feeling of humiliation (*thei'ka kya. de*) was increased when workers experienced direct belittling or other rude treatment from their superiors at work. Several people reported or repeated rumours of negative experiences with employers or labour contractors, which included rude behaviour, as well as withholding wages. This was said to happen especially in short-term and rather impersonal employment situations, such as road construction, where workers are hired for only a few days, weakening the 'moral economy' at work. The different aspects of autonomy – both flexibility-related and dignity-related, as well as the economic factors – that I have sought to disentangle analytically are in reality often intermixed. This was clear in the following statement by Ko Ko's neighbour. As he anticipated, she quit her factory job after just a few weeks working there for the following reasons: 'I did not like working there [in the factory] because the supervisors were always shouting. We constantly had to follow their orders. It was tiring; we had almost no breaks. Also, I had to give my child away to someone else to care for her, and I prefer to do that myself.' After examining how certain values, like autonomy, can be linked to the economic considerations that workers make, I now shift the focus to the employers.

The Employers

To make their businesses run smoothly, business owners have to restrict the autonomy of others, namely those whom they need to work for them. Keeler speaks of 'elective subordination' (2017: 156) in describing how lay

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Buddhists become the followers of a specific monk by providing material support through donations, something the monks rely on, while in this way the lay followers may establish a connection that offers them access to spiritual power. I see a process of 'elective subordination' taking place in the work sphere as well, though obviously with a different purpose. For someone to take a job in a workplace, the conditions must be good enough to give up their autonomy. In other words, the employer needs to be an employer worth submitting to. As labour turnover is high in Pathein, and workers usually avoid open confrontations with superiors, leaving a job to escape unsatisfactory conditions or to find a better opportunity elsewhere was widespread. For this to happen, there had to be no specific factors making it hard to leave, such as being bound to the employer by advance payments or the pressure of social ties, for example, in having other relatives who were already working for the same employer. To attract workers, business owners need to be able to guarantee stable incomes and fairly attractive conditions. The opening of several big garment factories in Pathein a few years ago added to the difficulties for smaller businesses like restaurants, retail shops and craft businesses in finding workers, as they now have to compete with factory wages. In the following section, I explore work relations between business owners and their unrelated workers, starting with payment strategies.

Payment: Money and Trust

Payment schemes in Pathein differed between workplaces. In potteries and other craft businesses, piece rates were common, while in other settings, like restaurants, grocery shops or rice mills, payment was made as a fixed sum per month. In many of these small businesses, payment was made in advance to the workers, often for several months. Advance payments in different forms occur in many places in the world, and while they constitute a form of debt bondage, advance wages, or loans on top of wages, are also actively asked for by workers (De Neve 1999: 392). In fact, workers in Pathein often made it a condition for accepting a job, and employers would explain such payments by saying 'I *have* to give the money in advance', while mentioning that they would actually prefer to test first whether a worker is good and reliable.

Advance payments can function both ways: the employer can trap the worker in debt and bind him to the firm, but it is also a crucial form of assistance that many workers actively demand. Economic hardship and indebtedness make it necessary for many workers to seek the immediate payment of larger sums to allow them to make crucial purchases or repay

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loans. Jan Breman (2010) described a system of 'neo-bondage' in India that characterizes work relationships between low-caste cane-cutters and sugarcane factory owners. It consists of an extra advance loan that needs to be paid back, plus the owners holding back actual payments until the end of the work season. Breman uses the prefix 'neo' to contrast this practice with earlier forms of debt bondage, which came with a range of other responsibilities for the employer and were passed on from generation to generation. The 'neo' form of bondage occurs in an industrial setting, is only seasonal and lacks the earlier aspect of patronage, such as providing long-term security for the worker's family. In urban settings in today's Myanmar, there is usually no long-term relationship between employers and workers that lasts several generations and includes all-encompassing security, meaning that work relations resemble more the second kind of debt bondage that Breman describes for industrial settings, in which agreements are strictly limited to the work period. Also, the support that goes beyond salaries remains restricted to the period of employment and thus to the time of the economic transaction. Such developments have been described by Scott (1972) as an erosion of patron-client-links within economic transitions.

The importance of payment methods also became clear in the contrast between small businesses and the new large, foreign-owned garment factories, a number of which had opened in Pathein prior to my research. I discussed modes of payment with a group of young workers who were employed in a factory. These workers received their salaries for a month's work only on the third day of the following month, a practice they disliked. This made it difficult for some of them to get by during the first month of employment, when they had to work full time without pay. Making workers wait another three days after the end of the month was something the workers suspected was a strategy to force them to stay at work for another month. This might seem like a small detail, but the method of payment also matters beyond just budgeting. Giving out salaries at the end of the month, as is typical in many modern employment situations, is a way for employers to ensure that their workers show up at work. This is different from the payment model found in small businesses in Myanmar, where the salary is often paid in advance, sometimes even several months in advance. Although receiving one's salary in advance has often been interpreted as a form of debt bondage, the negative reactions of the factory workers above indicate that, compared to the payment method in factories, the message being sent by employers who pay their workers in advance can be understood as: 'I trust you.' In the following section, I will show how expectations toward employers go beyond the paying of wages. It is here that the 'moral-economy' aspect of these relationships becomes especially visible.

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The 'Good Employer': Offering More Than Wages

What takes place between employers and workers corresponds to what Carrier has identified as a specific type of 'moral economy', in which the moral force comes directly from a specific economic interaction between people (2018: 24),[6] through 'mutuality' (Gudeman 2008), as mentioned earlier. One aspect of the expectations involved in these relationships was that employers should provide more than wages to their workers. In different settings in Pathein, such as craft workshops, rice mills and grocery shops or other retail shops, workers were provided with lunch, and often also with simple shelter. Business owners sometimes gave financial support to workers when they were expecting a child or wanted to build a house. They would usually speak of these payments as loans, but they did not always expect them to be repaid. I also saw employers offer refuge to workers whose homes had been affected by severe flooding in the monsoon months of 2016. Employers often made an effort to establish some form of social bond, including in order to instil loyalty. For instance, the owner of a watch shop tried to find the time to introduce himself to the families of some of his young female workers, who were adults but unmarried and were living away from home for the first time. He also provided shelter for his workers. On special occasions, such as the Buddhist New Year, he gave small presents to his workers and their families.

Some employers drew attention to the different levels of need among their workers. One rice-mill owner explained that he calculated the salary of his seventy employees according to each one's family needs. Someone with more children received more money than someone who is single, a logic recalling the practices of welfare states. 'If they have to worry about their families, they will not be happy at work. If they are not happy, they will not put much effort into their work. So I support them, which is good for both sides. A businessman who only thinks about himself will not be successful.' The rice-mill owner's statement clearly shows how good treatment of workers is linked to business success, revealing the profit-oriented aspect of his motivation.

Apart from workers' physical needs, some employers saw it as their duty to support their workers' spiritual well-being as well. In many businesses, workers are invited to participate in a blessing ritual, for which monks visit a business at least once a year. Small firms may grant a period of leave to their workers if the latter want to attend a meditation retreat for a few days. Once at a craft business, I saw the owner working alongside his workers, though he usually did the administrative tasks instead. Only on that day did I see him take over their work. Together with his wife, he was sitting on the floor, and they were shaping the bamboo for a hand-made umbrella.

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'Our workers asked for leave to go to the monastery for meditation,' he explained. 'So, we have to do their work.' Looking at his hands, he said: 'When our hands are dirty from the mud, we have to wash them. The same applies to the mind.' Here the employer linked meditation to a process of purification, perhaps beneficial not only for the workers' *kamma*,[7] but also for their productivity. In the following section, I explore social patterns and negotiations in relationships between employers and workers.

Social Bonds, Inequality and Negotiations

Employer–worker relations in small businesses in some respects resemble patron–client relations, which have been important in the social organization of Southeast Asia more generally (Scott 1972). Such relations are first and foremost characterized by inequality between the two parties but nevertheless contain a degree of reciprocity and loyalty is not only based on material exchange but often on some degree of affection as well. In the economic sphere, the employers may seem to be in a more powerful position, but the growing competition for workers is actually reducing their power. Workers try to avoid a 'debt of obligation' (ibid.: 93, 99) so that they can change workplaces easily, and many of these relations are not very durable. Nowadays, the reciprocal duties in work relations often remain limited to the period of work alone (see also Breman 2010). The differentiation of the economy during industrial development has further contributed to making such relations less comprehensive and less stable over time. Nevertheless, around five decades ago patron–client ties still represented 'diffuse personal bonds of affection when compared to the impersonal, contractual ties of the marketplace' (Scott 1972: 107), and something of this remains today, although the erosion has been clearly observable.

Sometimes, maintaining good relationships in the workplace has to be weighed against the economic demand to make a profit. My informant Myo Aung, the owner of a bamboo umbrella workshop, had purchased bamboo from one particular merchant for several years. The quality of the bamboo had declined year after year, as good bamboo was increasingly difficult to get hold of. One day he showed me an entire room full of complete umbrellas that he did not dare sell because of their low quality. Why did he keep producing umbrellas from batches of bad bamboo, instead of waiting until he receives better quality bamboo again? After all, making umbrellas is a complicated process of shaping the wood, painting the fabric and protecting it with several layers that need to dry in the sun. Completing a batch demands many people, skills and steps and can take several weeks. Given their low-quality bamboo, these finished products are economically useless

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for Myo Aung. However, 'I cannot let the merchant down,' he explains. 'We have been working together for many years, so I buy the bamboo anyway. And my workers get paid by the piece, so the work is important for them, too. I have to offer them regular work. So I let them produce the umbrellas anyway.' Accumulating products that have no economic value for him functions to maintain his good relations with a business partner, as well as providing his workers with on-going earnings. Myo Aung still sells enough good-quality umbrellas to be able to pay for both materials and workers, though his profit margin is low from producing his umbrellas that he cannot sell. However, the short-term loss is balanced out by maintaining long-term economic circulation, which reveals important social values and institutions (Parry and Bloch 1989). As in many cases, here the moral and social aspects cannot be separated neatly from economic considerations. Myo Aung knows that offering a regular income to his workers is the key to keeping them. And as he relies on their specific skills, he phrased his explanation in moral terms, showing how morality can also serve as reasoning regarding oneself and others.

Workplace relations were clearly marked by hierarchies and inequalities: this was observable in the ways people talked to each other and acted in each other's presence. Usually, workers never openly challenged the fact that their employer belonged to a different and better-off group. Some people invoked the law of *kamma* in this context to explain that each person has his or her place in society as a result of actions in past lives. However, while workers would usually not complain or criticize their superiors openly, one of the more common ways of dealing with conflict was to quit the job, often without giving notice. Thus, while economic differences and social hierarchies may be perceived as stemming from *kamma*, this does not mean that people passively accept behaviour they regard as rude or humiliating from their superiors. In the sphere of work, ensuring autonomy where possible can be a way of remaining relatively unconcerned and avoiding the strains and demands of these hierarchies, as we have seen at the beginning of the chapter with workers who choose self-employment over employment.

Despite the clear hierarchies and socio-economic differences, workers did sometimes make demands, as employers relied heavily on them. In the traditional umbrella workshop, the employer, Myo Aung, needed workers with specific skills, such as painting, and he faced difficulties in hiring people with such skills. At some point, he planned to move his workshop to a different location in Pathein. The workers, however, did not want to spend time and money on travelling to and from work, so they objected. In the end, Myo Aung left the workshop where it was. However, feelings of obligation occurred in the other direction as well. Workers knew that their employer relied on their specific skills, as in other craft businesses, so,

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even though the pay was low and the work hard, some of them were very reluctant to leave their jobs in such a situation. Affection and feelings of obligation can therefore also become a constraint, as workers might not dare to quit a job even when better opportunities arise. Especially when workers have worked in a business for a long time, feelings of loyalty and obligation may arise, as Carrier suggests, due to the history of transactions between two parties (2018: 30–31).

Nevertheless, calculated and often clear financial considerations remained crucial. This also applies in settings that appear rather close and informal; for example, when only two people work together as employer and worker, as the following example shows. Earlier I mentioned May Wah, the wife of Ko Ko, the water-seller. May Wah produced small pottery items in her house, which she sold as toys for children or as candleholders to be used on pagoda grounds. On some days, May Wah hired a young woman from the neighbourhood to help her with the painting and packing. The relationship between them appeared close and affectionate: her worker often had her small child with her, and the women talked about their worries and exchanged gossip from the neighbourhood. However, May Wah remained strictly in her role as the employer when calculating benefits. Her worker was paid by the piece and also got lunch but only in the dry season, when May Wah produced more and thus had more income. During the rainy months, her worker could still eat with her, but May Wah would deduct 500 Kyat (ca. 0.36 EUR) from her salary. Ultimately, therefore, mutual obligations resulting from employer–worker relations usually do not transcend power relations or the socio-economic gaps between them. Business owners usually made no attempt to support upward mobility for their workers. No matter how long a work relationship has lasted, workers are usually not integrated into the employer's family, despite employers sometimes using the rhetoric of kinship in relation to their employees in order to instil a sense of loyalty in them. Hierarchies and economic differences between employers and workers usually go unquestioned and unaltered. Ongoing changes in the labour market continually change interpersonal links, but employers continue to insist on interpersonal connections in order to evoke feelings of loyalty among their workers, while many workers continue to expect more from an employer than the mere payment of wages. In the following section, I describe how such expectations can clash with new work experiences.

Change and Confrontation

The far-reaching responsibilities of employers like those I described above may seem far from the reality of new private companies that have sprung

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up in the transformed metropolitan centres of Yangon and Mandalay. However, they were deeply rooted in the moral perceptions of my informants. This became obvious when these perceptions clashed with new forms of work experience. Such clashes, and the disappointment of expectations regarding how the other party ought to behave, are likely to appear in moments of significant economic change, as shown in the original contributions to the concept of 'moral economy' (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976). The rise or intensifying spread of capitalism brings about many such moments, and contemporary Myanmar is no different. I had arranged a group discussion with young female workers from one of the big new garment factories in Pathein. Most of the factories had only been operating for around four years at that time. The workers I talked to expressed discontent with their working conditions. They specifically emphasized that no lunch was provided at the factory and that they had to pay for their own shelter and work clothes. The fact that the salary in the factory was higher than in other locally available job, which allowed them to pay for shelter and lunch did not remove the moral understanding that the responsibility for these things lay with the employer.

The garment workers were also outraged about the supervisors' and employers' reactions when one worker recently hurt her hand on a sewing needle. They recalled that, instead of receiving proper care, she had to organize her own transport to hospital. In addition, she was blamed for the incident by her supervisors, who accused her of having been chatting with her work mates and not paying enough attention to her sewing. The young workers had started working in the factory only recently. They contrasted these new work experiences with other jobs in small businesses, where lunch, shelter and support in times of need had been provided. In reply, I pointed out that the size of the business might influence the relationship between employers and workers. Surely, I said, in a factory employing three thousand workers, an employer cannot look after all the workers in the way a small business owner can. However, the garment workers had a different view of the matter: 'The employers in our factory don't know anything,' they said; 'They are foreigners who are new to our country.[8] In the small businesses you talk about, everyone is from Myanmar.' The garment workers therefore linked the treatment of employees, including responsibilities that go beyond wage payments, to familiarity with Myanmar customs and norms, rather than to the massive difference in business size. In their view a *good* employer from Myanmar would naturally care for his workers and display concern and sympathy in difficult times, such as sickness.

The experience of working in drastically changing economic conditions and under new management styles, and the moral clashes that come with it, have been described for other transformation contexts, like Bulgaria

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(Kofti 2018), Russia (Morris and Hinz 2018), Poland (Dunn 2004), Kazakhstan (Trevisani 2018) and East Germany (Müller 2007), among others. While the socialist and post-socialist experiences of these countries differ strongly from those of Myanmar, one common factor is that actions that were previously seen as employers' duties were transferred on to people's own shoulders, in-kind support that had previously been taken for granted was lost, and expectations were generally disappointed amidst the increasing pressure and competition, requiring work relations to be renegotiated.

According to my informants, a 'good' employer cares for his workers to some extent beyond the salary payment. Taking into account these specific expectations, in the eyes of these women, a tea-shop owner employing eleven-year-old children (very common in Myanmar) to whom he offers shelter, food and doctor's visits and an 'opportunity' to gain experience could be seen as acting in a morally better way than a foreign investor offering regular and relatively high incomes to thousands of workers in a factory.

Employers, too, occasionally complained about the continuing erosion of bonds and loyalty. Especially when discussing their difficulties in hiring workers, shopkeepers would note a growing fixation on money as the sole criterion for accepting or rejecting a job. 'Nowadays, all people care about is the salary. That is the first thing they ask if they consider working here. If another shop offers only slightly more money, they will switch workplaces,' said one restaurant owner. While it is all too clear that unfavourable work is usually done by the least privileged groups in any given society of the global economy, hiring particularly vulnerable people, or people who are considered inferior in the social hierarchy, can also be a deliberate strategy of employers, partly in response to labour shortage or a high labour turnover. This can apply to, for instance, undocumented workers (Kim 2012), foreigners, ethnic minorities or women (De Neve 2005: 94). In Myanmar, children arguably constitute the most vulnerable type of worker. While child labour is not new in Myanmar, the number of children working far away from home in industrial settings has increased in recent years, a development noted in official sources (Pyae Thet Phyo 2018). This exemplifies two things that have played a role in this chapter. The first is how vulnerability is linked to one's ability to assert autonomy. The less able one is to do so, whether through youth, migration status or other factors, the stronger the control of one's employer becomes – but then so do his or her responsibilities. Secondly, we see here how newly introduced economic patterns interact with existing ones. Since a number of large garment factories have opened in Pathein, absorbing a large part of the grown-up labour force (because they mostly adhere to global labour standards and thus refrain from employing minors), children who work for less pay than adults have become an increasingly attractive labour force for local small businesses

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as an alternative to having to change the wages they pay to match what the factories offer.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by describing how the value of autonomy plays a role in livelihood choices in Myanmar. If they have a choice, many people who only have access to low-income, low-status, usually manual work opt for small-scale self-employment instead of subordinating themselves to an employer. This has to do with work conditions remaining unattractive and often failing to offer more structural and financial advantages than starting a small one-person venture, which in contrast offers more flexibility and possibly more dignity. I have also shown how this plays a role in small businesses implementing and combining different strategies to attract workers and bind them to the workplace – that is, both economic (advance payments) and social strategies (hiring people from the same family or village; creating an attractive work environment, using a rhetoric of kinship but also exploiting vulnerability). I have also discussed what is expected from employers and how work relations are negotiated in unequal social settings.

However, in Myanmar today, a range of new employment opportunities have emerged. While the private sector has created more and more jobs, those that are considered attractive and prestigious remain few and are to be found largely in the metropolitan areas of Yangon and Mandalay. In smaller towns like Pathein, local small businesses have mainly been complemented by garment factories in which the experience of work did not comply with the 'moral economy' of those workers I talked to in terms of what a 'good employer' should provide. Employers, on the other hand, kept struggling to attract and keep workers. They will continue to do so unless they are able to offer enough payment and a work environment that is perceived as sufficiently dignified to outweigh people's preferences for autonomy. They will continue unless the pressure from rising prices and rural dispossession becomes so strong that people have no choice but to enter increasingly into unsatisfying and often exploitative industrial employment and therefore have to tolerate superiors who do not stick to the moral codes of the past.

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doctoral research investigated the links between economic processes and moral ideas in the town of Pathein in lowland Myanmar. Her book based on her dissertation, *On Money and Mettā: Economy and Morality in Urban Buddhist Myanmar*, was published by LIT in 2020.

Notes

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1. Parts of this chapter draw on material in my book, *On Money and Mettā: Economy and Morality in Urban Buddhist Myanmar* (LIT Publishers, 2020).
2. It has been repeatedly pointed out that morality in the workplace can overlap with moral ideas in other spheres, such as the family (e.g. Kofti 2016). This becomes especially relevant when co-workers or employers are also relatives. However, among Burman-owned businesses, most workers are non-kin. This means that while workers have to juggle the expectations of employers with care duties, there are no direct intersectional obligations between the two spheres in the workplace. In fact, it is rather uncommon for ethnic Burmans to form family businesses in which family members systematically combine their efforts and capital over several generations. Family members might help out on an occasional basis, and if a business seems particularly promising a married couple might run it as a team. However, close relatives will rarely be employed as full-time workers. Distant relatives might come from the countryside to work in a relative's business in the city, which indeed represents the exploitation of kinship ties, but these distant relatives will often not be treated much differently from non-family workers by the employer, and they rarely hesitate to leave the workplace if a different opportunity arises. This is in contrast to the cases discussed by Deniz for Turkey and Chaki for India in this volume, where kinship is systematically utilized to build up family businesses.
3. To give some idea of different incomes, at the time of my research the daily wage in the garment factories was 3600 Kyat per day (ca. 2.60 EUR), plus extra pay for working during holidays. In contrast, the monthly starting salary of a teacher was 175,000 Kyat (ca. 120 EUR). Trishaw drivers reported to make around 6000 Kyat per day on good days (ca. 4.3 EUR), while snack sellers sometimes made more than 20,000 Kyat (ca. 14.5 EUR) per day. In small businesses such as restaurants or grocery stores, workers would often get no more than 50,000 Kyat per month (ca. 36 EUR). In my interviews, families with two children who had to survive on day labour estimated their daily expenses at around 7,000 Kyat (ca. 5 EUR), showing that such wages are too low to sustain a family. In these segments of society, indebtedness was common. For these people, small-scale self-employment can often be financially more beneficial than low-paid jobs. However, many forms of small-scale self-employment are marked by considerable fluctuations in incomes. The average

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conversion rate during my main period of research (August 2015 to August 2016) was 1,377 Kyat to the EUR.

4. In the census of 2014, 38.8% of the total working population stated they were 'own account workers', making this the largest group among the respondents. This includes the many small-scale traders, providers of services or owners of stalls and businesses that do not employ workers (Myanmar Department of Population 2017).
5. On the significance of water in Burman Buddhist rituals, see Kumada (2015).
6. Other examples of economic interactions that Carrier mentions are those between co-workers, between landowners and tenants, or between shopkeepers and customers (2018: 24).
7. According to the Buddhist law of cause and effect, people's current situations, including their physical, social, and economic aspects, result from their *kamma*, which is determined by their actions in past lives. One's actions in the present and the merit (*kusala*) one gains from them will influence one's future rebirths. Meditation as a religious practice is a meritorious act.
8. The investors had come from China, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Japan, and often some higher-level foreign staff were also present in the factory. The workers' comments cannot be seen as a general rejection of foreign employers, since those who acted more in accordance with their expectations (e.g. by providing lunch vouchers) were more readily accepted by the workers.

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