

A Hub of Overland Transportation, Transformation of Chiang Rai City after World War II

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Abstract

Chiang Rai City has undergone a significant transformation since World War II, evolving into a government center in upper northern Thailand. Since the 1990s, however, the regional cooperation and development plan, has reshaped Chiang Rai, transforming the city from a far-post government center into a pivotal network city in the borderlands of upper Mekong region. This article examines this spatial transformation, through the investments on the city's infrastructure and overland transportation—particularly a modern road construction—which have arguably re-positioned the city of Chiang Rai as a key node of cross-border connectivity between Northern Thailand and its neighboring countries, especially Myanmar, Laos and Yunnan of China. This spatial transformation has facilitated the movements of migrant labor, travelers, and goods, while also attracting economic investments in housing, residential areas, a university, and hospitals. Particularly, this article analyzes road networks and inter-city transportation, through a road ethnography of the Green Bus, showing traveling practices between Chiang Rai, the northernmost city in Thailand, and Chiang Mai, the largest inland city in Northern Thailand. It argues that the improvements of road networks and inter-city transportation, in and through Chiang Rai, since the beginning of 21st century has intensified connectivity between the cities of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, socially and culturally, constituting Chiang Rai city into a hub of overland transportation in the borderlands of upper Mekong.

Keywords: Chiang Rai city, Mobility, Road ethnography, Inter-city transportation, Public transport, Upper Mekong borderlands, Overland transportation

Introduction

Chiang Rai City has undergone a significant transformation since World War II, recently evolving into a hub of overland transportation in upper northern Thailand. Initially established as a strategic outpost with government offices, military camps, and an airport, this city's infrastructure development, within the social and political contexts of the Cold War in mainland Southeast Asia, from 1950s to 1980s, aimed to exert control over the bordering areas of Northern Laos and the Eastern Shan State of Myanmar. Since the 1990s, however, the regional cooperation and development plan, has reshaped Chiang Rai, transforming the city from a far-post government center into a pivotal network city in the borderlands of upper Mekong region. This article

examines this spatial transformation, through the investments on the city's transportation networks — particularly a modern road construction—which have arguably re-positioned the city of Chiang Rai as a node of cross-border connectivity between Northern Thailand and its neighboring countries. This road construction has facilitated the movements of migrant labor, travelers, and goods, while also attracting economic investments in housing, residential areas, a university, and hospitals (for supporting cross-border healthcare service access). Inspired by The Sociology of Transportation that Glenn Yago (1983) proposes that the links between the transportation systems and urban planning of a city lead to impacts that affect living conditions, including

inequality in access to public transportation and movement. Transportation systems are therefore fundamentally important in shaping the relationships and social space of cities. Changes in transportation, such as the use of automobiles, road construction, trains, and cars, have a great impact on the organization of human relationships and activities up to the issue of determining the structure of managing the environment and the expansion of cities and areas and organizing relationships between cities in national and global city network systems. In this article, I examine road networks and inter-city transportation, through a road ethnography of the Highway 118, or Route 118 and the Green Bus transport service, showing traveling practices between Chiang Rai, the northernmost city in Thailand, and Chiang Mai, the largest inland city in Northern Thailand. I propose that the improvements of road networks and inter-city transportation, between Chiang Rai city and Chiang Mai city, since the beginning of 21st century has intensified connectivity between the two cities, socially and culturally. This inter-city connectivity in turn helps to constitute Chiang Rai city into a hub of overland transportation in the borderlands of upper Mekong. These borderlands include northern Thailand, the eastern Shan State of Myanmar, Yunnan in China, and northern Laos.

My aim of study here is to explore road networks and overland transportation, particularly patterns of mobility through an ethnography of road and transportation, highlighting how Chiang Rai City has become a hub of overland transportation in the contexts of regional development of Upper Mekong borderlands. Specifically, I focus my analysis on travel practices involving people, goods, and services between Chiang Rai City and Chiang Mai City, using a case study of the Green Bus transport service, operating on Route 118 between the two cities. I argue that the development and expansion of road networks and transportation between Chiang Rai City and Chiang Mai City since the 2010s, first, have been significant in boosting speed and intensity of the mobility of people and commodity. Second, these inter-city transportation and connectivity overland, thus are crucial in constituting and transforming Chiang Rai city into a hub of overland transportation in the upper Mekong borderlands.

Data for this research is based on my fieldwork in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai from February to December

2023. Methodologically, I apply *Road Ethnography* (Dalakoglou, 2010; Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012; Horta, 2019) to study the journeys of Green Bus drivers and their passengers, as well as the delivery services provided by the Green Bus company between the cities of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Road ethnography is a study of roads that is not only about transportation infrastructure but also a study of roads as actors that cause changes in people's way of life through mobility and as part of creating social and cultural worlds for people. Modern roads not only enhance the convenience and speed of travel for drivers and road users but also play a crucial role in shaping social reality and creating a sense of time and place for local people whose way of life is intertwined with their experiences of using the roads (Panyagaew, 2011). This ethnography of Route 118 will reflect travel practices, on the roads, and overland transportation between the two cities in northern Thailand. In the following, I begin with a historical snapshot of Chiang Rai city transformation, next I investigate the city's road networks through the construction and expansion of inter-city roads, particularly Route 118, between Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai, which has recently been improved in the regional development contexts of the upper Mekong region. Then, with the case studies of Green Bus public transport, I will show how modern transportation operates and facilitates traveling practices and connectivity between the cities of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. To this point, I explore the experiences of Green Bus drivers and passengers, and the parcels delivery service, which operated by the Green Bus, showing how these inter-city transportation take place. In conclusion, I analyze and propose insights into mobility and transportation that arguably play a crucial role in the transformation of Chiang Rai city.

A Historical Snapshot of Chiang Rai City Transformation

Chiang Rai, the northernmost city in Thailand, has a rich history that predates its designation as a border province after World War II. Historically, once a principality in the confederation of Tai states of the upper Mekong, dating back to the era of King Mang Rai (1239- 1311), the first ruler of the Lanna Kingdom (Penth, 1989), however, after the Mang Rai dynasty collapsed in 16th century, the city fell under Burman

domination and was abandoned due to warfare until it was liberated, by the Tai rulers with the military supports from Siam, in the late 18th century (Ongsakul, 2005). The city was subsequently rebuilt in 1844, when Lanna and Siam became more integrated. The restoration of Chiang Rai city began during the early years of the Chakri dynasty. Notably, under King Rama V, Chiang Rai was restructured as the administrative center of northern Siam, in 1910. Chiang Rai since then had become a significant northern province of Siam (1890s-1930s) (Irwin, 2018; Pongsawat, 2010).

From a deserted town, Chiang Rai and its surrounded region gradually evolved into a border province of modern Siam. As a city, Chiang Rai underwent dynamic changes in its geographical and social landscape, with the lives and migration patterns of its inhabitants shaped by the historical conditions of settlement, namely war captive Tais and Christian followers from Chiang Mai and Lamphun, Yunnanese Muslim, and overseas Chinese from central Thailand, respectively. All resettled in the present downtown area of the city (Sirichai, 2023). From its origin as a historic town of the Tai states in the upper Mekong, Chiang Rai has emerged as a government center on the trading route, from Yunnan via eastern Shan states of Myanmar and Northern Laos, in the northern border of modern Siam, operating at both socio-political and economic levels across the national borders (Ann Maxwell Hill, 1998).

After being incorporated into modern Siam, Chiang Rai city gradually evolved into a government center under the Siamese nation. Governors were dispatched from Bangkok to oversee administrative functions and establish a governing structure and infrastructure, government offices, military camps and the state's prison. As a result, during World War II, Chiang Rai emerged as one of Thailand's strategic provinces, bordering Myanmar and Laos.

During World War II (1939-1945), Chiang Rai became a military base and a route for transporting Japanese soldiers invading Myanmar and served as a field headquarters to mobilize Thai troops for combatting in Chiang Tung, in eastern Shan State of Myanmar (Chuaprasit, 2006). The Thai government announced an alliance with Japan and was tasked with seizing Chiang Tung and the whole region of Shan State. To carry out this mission, the Thai government established Payap Army, with headquarters in Phayao,

advancing through Muang Sat and Tachileik via Chiang Rai and Mae Sai border town to capture Chiang Tung. This move was intended to demarcate a line to prevent the Republic Chinese army then based in Yunnan from advancing south. The Thai state annexed Chiang Tung and the whole region of eastern Shan State, incorporating it into the Kingdom of Thailand and preparing to establish a government organization based on the Thai bureaucratic system. The administration, called 'Saharat Thai Derm' (in Thai) was divided into nine districts: Muang Keng Tung, Mong Yong, Mong Phayak, Mlen, Mong Ko, Mong Khak, Mong Beng, Mong Hsat, and Mong Hang.

After the war, though the Japanese and Thai ally had to surrender, Chiang Rai city was restored and cross-border trade between Chiang Tung (in Shan states) and Chiang Rai still continued to be operated, significantly distributed to market activities in these border areas, along with drug smuggling, across borders (Lintner, 1991). In 1950, Mae Sai border town area was promoted to Mae Sai District due to its vibrant wholesale and volumes of import trade. It can be considered that Chiang Rai, then a developing small town, has gradually become an important city in the upper northern region of Thailand, serving as both a military and vital trade route connecting Thailand, eastern Shan State, Northern Laos and Yunnan. Nevertheless, in the central Thai media representation, in the early 1950s, Chiang Rai was primarily recognized for its multiethnic region, where "30 Ethnic Groups" most of whom originally resettled from Yunnan (Srisawat, 2014). At that time, Chiang Rai city thus still was perceived as a remote border area, distant from the center of power and the modern worlds.

In other words, Chiang Rai has undergone a significant transformation after World War II, evolving into a government center in upper northern Thailand. Since the late 1980s, after the end of the Cold War, a regional development plan and economic investment in upper Mekong region has significantly altered the infrastructure and perception of Chiang Rai. Once viewed as a remote province, Chiang Rai city has undergone substantial transformation, particularly in its road and transport infrastructure. The regional cooperation and development initiative, just mentioned, known as the "Economic Quadrangle", gradually transformed Chiang Rai city into a hub of inter-town

traveling and cross border trade in the upper Mekong borderlands. This regional development focused on significant infrastructure investments, including roads, river ports, crossing bridges, and immigration checkpoints, all aimed at enhancing and utilizing Chiang Rai city, as a cross- border trade corridor with neighboring countries, especially Myanmar, Laos and Yunnan of China (Walker, 1999; 2009). This spatial transformation has facilitated the movements of migrant labor, travelers, and goods, while also attracting economic investments in housing, residential areas, a university, and hospitals.

The regional plan and development projects have not only facilitated cross- border mobility of migrant labors, commodities, and travelers, domestic and international, but has also spurred investments in real estate, healthcare, education, and tourism in Chiang Rai city. These developments have become crucial drivers of the city's growth and urban area expansion and road networks (Rimmer & Dick, 2019). Once a Thai government headquarter and the center of modern hospital and education in the northern region of Thailand, Chiang Rai city has evolved into a vibrant networked city within the borderlands of upper Mekong. Recently, China's influence—particularly in economic and political spheres—has significantly shaped regional dynamics. Through trade, tourism, investment, and a strategic international relations policy (Santasombat 2014). China's economic and political influence have played a crucial role in expanding connectivity between Chiang Rai city and border towns in northern Thailand, as well as with countries like Laos and Myanmar. Key border towns such as Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Khong have been central to this expansion, following the development strategies outlined for the Greater Mekong Subregion.

The growth of infrastructure and economic activities—including trade, investment, and tourism—has connected Chiang Rai with Northern Laos, Eastern Shan States of Myanmar and Yunnan of China. This is evidenced by the construction of key cross- border infrastructure, such as the Fourth Thailand- Laos Friendship Bridge and the Chiang Khong- Huay Xai International Immigration checkpoint, which officially opened in December 2013 and the improvement of Mae Sai- Tachileik, immigration checkpoint facilitate these connectivity. Since Thailand became a member of the

ASEAN community at the end of 2015, government investments in infrastructure have continued to aim at facilitating economic connectivity and the mobility of people in and out of the country. This has further reinforced the transformation of Chiang Rai within the contexts of regional development of upper Mekong borderlands. Following, to the Thai government "Border Province Special Economic Zone Development Project", three key districts in Chiang Rai Province—Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Khong—were target areas for regional economic development in upper northern Thailand. This development was to improve city infrastructure, road enhancements, public utilities, and customs facilities in the border towns (Panyaagew, et al., 2020).

In Chiang Rai city notable improvements were made in the road network, particularly along the Chiang Rai City- Chiang Khong route, where the Fourth Thailand- Laos Friendship Bridge was constructed to facilitate cross- river mobility for people and goods. Immigration and customs checkpoints, along with basic public utilities, were also built, upgrade in the district towns of Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Khong. These investments enhanced transportation links between Chiang Rai City and these border towns. Numbers of private sector investments in healthcare services has significantly increased, leading to the opening of hospitals and private clinics in Chiang Rai City and its border towns. The rise in the number of hospitals and clinics has improved access to healthcare services in Chiang Rai Province, attracting clients from neighboring towns in Myanmar and Laos. (Buadoktoom, 2020) This change has fostered a new connectivity between Chiang Rai City and its border towns, extending across the borders to smaller cities in neighboring countries, such as Tachileik, Mueang Yong, and Chiang Tung in eastern Shan states of Myanmar, and Huay Xai, Luang Namtha, and Mueang Singh in northern Laos.

Chiang Rai city's road networks

The development and construction of city roads in Chiang Rai urban area (see map below), significantly began in 2010: A key development in Chiang Rai City's road infrastructure is the bypass road, which connects to Phahonyothin Road (National Highway No. 1) and opened in 2019. This new route helps alleviate traffic

congestion within the city. Along with this the expansion of Highway 131 and Highway 5023 has further enhanced connectivity, passing through the city center. These bypass roads on the west and east sides of Chiang Rai facilitate travel to Mae Sai District and Mae Fah Luang International Airport. And the expansion of Highway 1418, also known as the Eastern Bypass Road, improves access to the city from the Mae Fah

Luang Airport intersection. This route extends a total of 12 kilometers from Mae Fah Luang Airport in Ban Du Subdistrict to the bridge over the Kok River in Doi Hang Subdistrict. It then continues to connect with Phahonyothin Road (National Highway No. 1) in San Sai Subdistrict, covering additional distance of 21 kilometers.

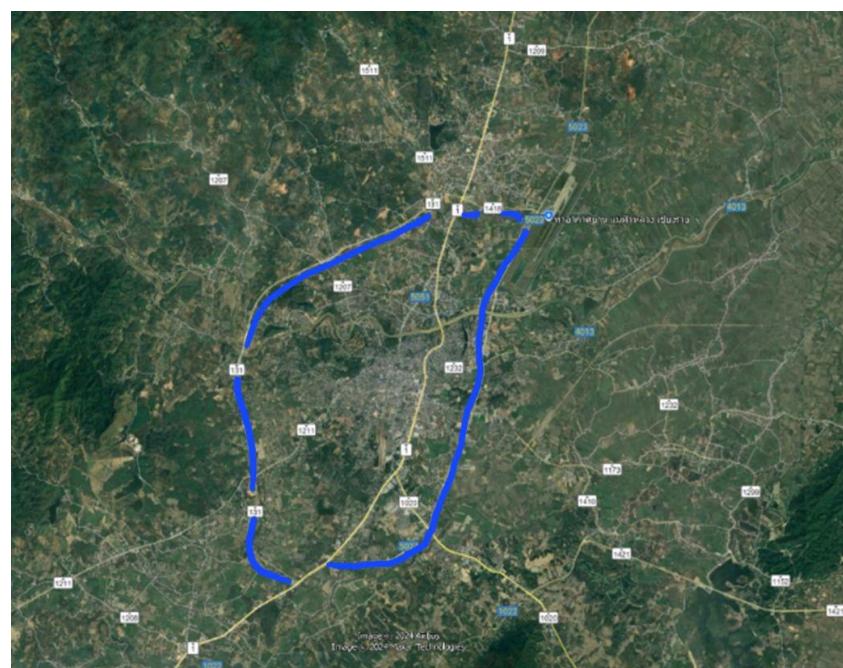


Figure 1 Chiang Rai City

Source: Google Maps (Modified by the Author)

Through this city road construction, we can observe the growth of Chiang Rai City's urban areas and the expansion of road networks to the border towns. This spatial change reveals at least two levels of city transformation:

First, Physical Structure: Beyond the development of city road networks and the improvement of customs checkpoints in the border towns, significant investments have been made in building and expanding private hospitals from Chiang Rai City to its branches in Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Khong. This expansion has established Chiang Rai City as a hub for cross-border mobility in the Upper Mekong region, attracting healthcare service users from neighboring countries and migrant workers seeking for employment, respectively.

Second, Spatial practice in Daily Life: The growth of border towns and the expanding network of Chiang Rai City, combined with improved transportation and modern roads, has intensified cross-border connectivity and social interactions between local residents and other migrants. This change has altered lifestyles, making people increasingly dependent on the modern transportation system. Today, individuals in this border region can easily travel across borders—from Myanmar or Laos to Chiang Rai and vice versa—to find jobs, conduct financial transactions, visit relatives, and access to services, particularly in healthcare and higher education.

Recently, Chiang Rai City has undergone significant investment in transport infrastructure, transforming the city into a regional hub for transportation and cross-border trade. This development

has established strong connections between Chiang Rai city and the three border towns, as well as more distant inland cities in Myanmar and Laos. The commodity links extend even further transnationally to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan. In summary, Chiang Rai city along with its key border towns—Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Khong—has built a robust network that facilitates trade and travel with cities in Myanmar, Laos, and Yunnan Province in Southwest China.

The development of modern roads and the growth of transportation networks in the border area have led to a more complex system used by the government to manage the mobility of people and commodities, as well as interstate relation. Additionally, the investment and expansion of healthcare services, including clinics and private hospitals that provide cross-border access to healthcare in Chiang Rai and its border towns, highlight the long-standing historical connections between Chiang Rai City and other towns and cities in these borderland areas. This interconnectedness is evident in the movement of migrant workers, transnational consumption, and cross-border interactions among local populations in the Upper Mekong region. (Panyagaew, 2007; Rowedder, 2022)

Route 118, Chiang Rai- Chiang Mai connectivity

In the past, particularly since the completion of Lampang Railway Station in 1916, connecting Lampang and Bangkok, travels and overland transportation between Chiang Rai and other cities in northern Thailand such as Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang and Nan, were mainly operated on the National Highway No. 1 or Phahonyothin Road. In other words, travels from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai, via a modern transport vehicle, then must operate via, the Phahonyothin Road or Lampang-Chiang Rai route. This route linked people and commodity between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai cities for several decades. Up until 1970s, transportation between Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai began to develop and gradually improved by the construction of the Highway 118, or Route 118, to connect the cities of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai directly.

Highway 118 is the primary road connecting Chiang Rai City to Chiang Mai to the south-west. This highway cuts through the valley communities nestled in

the mountain ranges that border Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai cities. In the small towns along this route, the road passes through local markets, inter-town bus stations, and gasoline stations. Route 118, begins in Chiang Mai at the intersection with National Highway 11 in Mueang Chiang Mai District. It extends to meet National Highway 1, or Phahonyothin Road, at the Mae Lao intersection in Mae Lao District, Chiang Rai Province. The total length of this inter-city highway is 158 kilometers. In Chiang Mai Province, it passes through San Sai District and Doi Saket District before entering Chiang Rai Province, where it traverses Wiang Pa Pao District and Mae Suai District before reaching Mueang District and Chiang Rai City.

In the past three decades, Route 118 had only two traffic lanes and featured a winding route through mountainous terrain, which led to frequent accidents during the rainy season. To address these issues, the Department of Highways initiated a project to expand the road to four lanes along its 158-kilometer stretch. Actually, this expansion was part of a regional development and economic cooperation plan among the member countries of the Greater Mekong Subregion. Surveying and construction for this road improvement project began in 2007, managed by the Department's Road Construction Office No. 1.

Today, the Route 118 has become a major road linking the two historic towns of northern Thailand, Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, resulting in increased travel and the flow of products, goods, and modern vehicles. In the 2020s, the Thai government approved a plan to develop and expand the entire length of this highway into a four-lane road. About 80 kilometers was completed. The remaining phase involves expanding the road to four lanes in Mae Suai District and connecting it to National Highway 1 (from Payao to Chiang Rai). The construction began in July 2023 and is expected to be completed in July 2026.

Currently, despite the incomplete expansion, the sections of the road that have been finished have made travel between Chiang Mai City and Chiang Rai City much more easier and faster. The road is now more convenient and safer, significantly reducing travel time between the two cities from approximately 3 hours to just 2 hours compared to the past 10 years.

Traveling between Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai primarily relies on personal vehicles; however, for

tourists and low-income travelers, such as cross-border migrant workers, public transport is essential. Bus travel is a popular choice, and the Green Bus Company, commonly known as Green Bus, holds the exclusive concession for public transport services on this route. Operating since 1973, Green Bus has maintained a consistent presence on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route. The Green Bus service schedule reflects its significant role in public transport in Northern Thailand, particularly on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route. This route is central to Green Bus operations, featuring more frequent services compared to other routes and handling the highest volume of passengers.

Road ethnography of the green bus

In 1964, Thai Pattanakit Transport Company Limited took over the Lampang-Chiang Rai route as its first concession. Initially, these buses resembled trucks with wooden bodies and were easily recognizable by their green sides, which led people to call them “green buses.” The Green Bus route extended from Mae Sai to Chiang Rai, Lampang, Lamphun, and ultimately to Chiang Mai.

By 1973, road improvements, including the expansion of Route 118 connecting Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, made travel more convenient and faster. This development allowed for a revised bus route that significantly reduced travel time. Consequently, the Green Bus Company adjusted its routes to incorporate Route 118 for quicker travel between the Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. In 1979, Chaipattana Transport Chiang Mai Co., Ltd. was established to manage operations for Thai Pattanakit Transport Co., Ltd. This new company enhanced its service with air-conditioned buses and expanded routes throughout Northern Thailand.

Currently, the Green Bus primarily operates its transport service on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route with services running in both directions. There are 16 trips per day, increasing to 18 trips on weekends (Friday to Sunday) from 7 AM to 6 PM.

In addition, the company provides service connecting Chiang Rai City to the three border towns, specifically to Mae Sai, with 4 trips per day from 8 AM to 3 PM. This transport service begins at the Chiang Mai city station and runs in the opposite direction from the Mae Sai station.

Since the bus service became more frequent and systematically developed in 2023, the company has expanded its service to include not only passenger transport but also parcel delivery and charter car rentals for travel throughout Thailand.

On the Green Buses, each bus is staffed by one driver and one passenger attendant. The attendant is responsible for checking tickets, verifying passenger seats, serving water and snacks, monitoring destination points for each passenger, and notifying the driver when to stop for drop-offs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, bus operations were halted, resulting in a significant number of passenger attendants resigning. When service resumed, many buses operated without attendants, forcing drivers to assume all responsibilities.

Green Bus drivers are full-time employees, with approximately 30 drivers on staff. They receive monthly salaries and various benefits from the company. To become a driver, candidates must pass a driving test, which includes an initial trial on a short-distance route. Successful candidates are then eligible to drive on other routes.

Drivers rotate through different routes, and their driving is monitored for safety. This includes speed control, GPS installation, regular vehicle maintenance, and addressing passenger complaints. All drivers are male, primarily from Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai provinces.

The driver

San, 46 years old, hails from Bua in Thoeng District, Chiang Rai Province. After completing primary high school (grade 9), he began his career as a bus boy, responsible for collecting fares on buses along the Chiang Rai- Thoeng route operated by Chainarong Company, commonly known as the red buses. At the age of 22, he obtained his driver's license and was promoted to a bus driver for the red buses.

When San was 26, he sought a new challenge and applied to drive for Green Bus Thailand. Although the company typically required drivers to be over 30 years old, San's extensive driving experience allowed him to secure a position. He began driving the Green Bus on the Chiang Mai- Chiang Rai route and eventually expanded to other routes.

San's daily routine as a driver involves receiving his driving schedule at 6:00 p.m. each day, outlining his

trips for the following day. On average, he drives 1-2 trips daily, though during Buddhist holidays and tourist seasons, he may have to drive up to three trips in a day. If scheduled for a morning drive, San might complete two trips in a single day. However, if his schedule includes an afternoon departure with an evening arrival, he will stay overnight at the destination station, where the company provides dormitories for such occasions.

During peak festival times, San noted that he could drive up to 60 trips a month due to the increased volume of travelers between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.

Once San receives his driving schedule for the day, he begins by preparing the vehicle. This preparation includes cleaning the bus, checking the oil, inspecting various equipment, and arranging water and snacks for passengers. He also ensures that any parcels or items needing transport are loaded and secured under the bus. The weight of the cargo can significantly affect San's income, as it varies with the amount of cargo transported on each trip.

Jan, another Green Bus driver I interviewed, 56 years old, hails from Chiang Saen District in Chiang Rai Province. He began his career as a bus driver with Sombat Tour Company, operating the Chiang Rai-Bangkok route. In 2012, seeking a change from the night shifts that adversely affected his health, he joined Green Bus Company to work as a daytime driver on a new route in the North.

At Green Bus, Jan was initially assigned to the Mae Sai-Mae Sot route, a long-distance journey that demands considerable expertise. He found this route particularly challenging due to its steep, winding mountain roads, which can be dangerous for inexperienced drivers.

Currently, Jan drives for Green Bus on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route, typically making two trips per day depending on his assigned schedule. He reflects on his experiences driving this route before it was upgraded from a two-lane road through mountainous terrain. The prolonged construction, which lasted several years, made driving particularly challenging, especially for a large vehicle like the Green Bus. He had to exercise

extra caution, especially during the rainy season, and despite his careful driving, he has witnessed accidents along the road.

Since the road was improved and widened to four lanes after the COVID-19 pandemic, Jan mentioned that bus driving has become easier, though it has not significantly increased travel speed. This is due to the company's enforcement of a speed limit of 80 kilometers per hour, monitored through GPS systems that issue warnings if the limit is exceeded, prioritizing passenger safety. He mentioned that travel on this route is often delayed, especially when passing through community areas with fairs or during school break periods, in Mae Khachan and Wiang Pa Pao, where traffic jams frequently occur.

After the COVID-19 situation improved, inter-provincial travel restrictions were lifted, allowing bus services to resume, particularly on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route. The surge in passenger numbers prompted the Green Bus company to increase trip frequency, nearly reaching pre-pandemic levels. Now, a Green Bus departs from the bus terminal in Chiang Mai city every 15 minutes. Additionally, with the introduction of parking spots at the Central Festival Shopping Mall, Jan, as a driver, must check boarding information for passengers at the shopping mall before departing from the bus station. This new stop has proven popular, especially among teenagers who prefer to shop at the mall before catching the bus to Chiang Rai, rather than waiting at the bus station.

From his experience, Jan has noticed a significant demographic shift among passengers. Previously, many foreign tourists, particularly from China, frequented the buses, often chartering them for specific tours to Chiang Rai. However, there are now fewer Chinese tourists and a rise in global visitors, particularly western backpackers heading to Laos. Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in passengers, including Thai students traveling home to Chiang Rai for holidays and school breaks, as well as migrant workers commuting between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.



Figure 2 the Green Bus from Chiang Rai, on Road 118, on the way to Chiang Mai (2025)

Source: The Author

The passenger

As mentioned earlier, traveling between Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai, via Route 118 and National Highway No. 1, spans approximately 185 kilometers. This route is popular for city-to-city travel on the Green Bus and is frequently used by local passengers. Students traveling for their studies, such as those attending Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Maejo University, and Payap University in Chiang Mai, as well as Chiang Rai Rajabhat University and Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai province, often rely on this transport service. Additionally, migrant workers frequently use the Green Bus to commute between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai on weekends. The route is also popular among foreign tourists, many of whom use the Green Bus service to reach Chiang Rai before continuing their journey to neighboring countries, particularly Laos.

The Green Bus company's longstanding operation on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route has indeed made it a crucial lifeline for many passengers. By accommodating approximately 1.5 million passengers annually, it underscores the role of bus not just as a means of transport, but as a facilitator of education, employment, and tourism.

For students, it offers a reliable way to commute to universities in both cities. For workers, especially those in the migrant community, it provides essential connectivity to jobs and resources. Tourists benefit

from the service as they explore the cultural and natural attractions of the region.

The Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route's prominence reflects not only the practical needs of its passengers but also its integration into the social and economic fabric of northern Thailand and beyond. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ridership for the Green Bus company highlights the broader challenges faced by the transportation sector. While the number of passengers on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route has decreased to around 700,000 per year, the ongoing recovery reflects a gradual return to normalcy.

With about 1,000 passengers daily on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai route and around 120 on the Chiang Mai-Mae Sai route, the service continues to cater to a diverse group. This includes foreign tourists, migrant workers, and college students, particularly during holiday periods when demand peaks. The resilience of the Green Bus service in adapting to these changes, while still supporting the needs of its varied passenger base, underscores its importance in facilitating mobility between the two cities.

The delivery service

The expansion of parcel delivery services by Green Bus in 2023, is a strategic move that not only diversifies its revenue streams but also enhances its role in modern transportation service. Initially focusing on small items, the delivery service's evolution to handle

larger consignments reflects the company's responsiveness to market demand.

As the parcel delivery volume grew, implementing a more systematic operation likely involved creating standardized procedures for pricing, handling, and logistics. This shift could also improve efficiency, ensuring that both passenger transport and delivery services run smoothly without compromising service quality.

This dual service model positions Green Bus as a vital player in the local economy, supporting not just passenger mobility but also facilitating commerce and trade across the province it serves.

By designating specific drop-off and pick-up points in key locations like the company office and local bus stations, they streamline the parcel delivery process, making it convenient for customers.

The Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai-Mae Sai route's high frequency significantly enhances the parcel delivery service, making it a viable option for urgent deliveries. The ability to send items within a few hours or up to a day caters to various needs, from fresh produce to essential documents and even larger goods. This quick turnaround is particularly beneficial for local businesses and individuals who rely on timely deliveries for their operations or personal needs. It also positions Green Bus as a key player in the logistics landscape of northern Thailand.

Green Bus's systematic approach to parcel handling greatly enhances the efficiency and reliability of their delivery service. By offering package-wrapping services and consignor registration, they ensure that parcels are well-prepared for transport, reducing the risk of damage. The documentation of parcel details adds a layer of accountability, while SMS notifications through the Green Bus app keep customers informed about their parcel status in real time.

The establishment of warehouse facilities in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai not only facilitates better management of incoming and outgoing parcels but also allows for more efficient storage, especially for larger or bulk items. This comprehensive system not only improves customer satisfaction but also strengthens Green Bus's position in the logistics sector, making them a convenient option for both individual and business clients.

Green Bus Company in Chiang Mai runs a structured daily parcel delivery service with a pre-delivery cut-off time of 45 minutes before each bus departs. This system ensures efficient handling and timely delivery of parcels. Here are some examples of the types of parcels commonly delivered daily:

Flower Delivery: Flower shops often use Green Bus delivery service to transport flowers from Chiang Mai fresh market 'Warorot Market' or from local flower gardens and orchards to Chiang Rai. Green Bus ensures that both one-time and regular customers receive efficient service, with dedicated procedures to handle their parcel needs reliably.

Fresh Flowers: Fresh flowers are the top product transported by Green Bus, with a high volume of deliveries from Chiang Mai's Warorot Market and various flower gardens to Chiang Rai city and Mae Sai border town. Seasonal flowers, including gypsophila, cutter flowers, and roses, are commonly transported. Flowers are carefully cut, wrapped in boxes to prevent damage, and transported quickly to maintain freshness. Inter-city transport is managed both by Green Bus vehicles and dedicated transportation services. To use this delivery service, customers often reserve a service with Green Bus in advance to ensure timely delivery. Upon arrival in Chiang Rai city or Mae Sai border town, flowers are picked up at local flower markets such as Sirikorn Market or forwarded across borders to Tachileik, in Myanmar. The flowers are primarily sent to flower shops for resale, arranged into wreaths or bouquets, and use in events like housewarmings, weddings, and funerals.

Liquor: Liquor is another product often transported from Mae Sai-Tachileik border towns to Chiang Mai, though it is less frequent compared to flowers and other fresh produce. Liquor is commonly transported as part of direct trade between a liquor shop in Mae Sai- Tachileik and its consumers. These customers are regular patrons who have previously purchased liquor from those shops and place orders with the shop for delivery. The shop, after learning about Green Bus delivery service, therefore turn in to use the service.

Other parcels: car spare parts, medical equipment and bold samples

After this inter-city delivery service took place, medical equipment ordered by hospitals in Chiang Rai

from suppliers in Chiang Mai is also delivered. Blood samples and biopsies transported from hospitals in Chiang Rai to hospitals in Chiang Mai for examination are also included.

It is interesting to discover that car spare parts are another thing that is transported through Green Bus delivery service between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Most car spare parts are ordered by auto repair shops in Chiang Rai. Motorbike parts in Chiang Rai City are also typically ordered from parts stores (both new and second-hand) in Chiang Mai. Auto repair shops in Chiang Rai generally place more orders with stores in Chiang Mai rather than Bangkok because products can be ordered and delivered more quickly.

Documents, especially those from car and motorcycle leasing companies, often need to be processed by the main office in Chiang Mai before transactions can be completed. This is particularly true for companies with branches in Chiang Rai city. As a result, the rapid transportation of these documents is essential, using a delivery service with Green Bus transportation is more popular than other methods.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the transformation of Chiang Rai city, which has evolved from an administrative center of the Thai government after World War II into a hub of transportation, serving as a pivotal node for cross-border mobility in Thailand's northernmost region and its neighboring countries. A significant dimension of this transformation was catalyzed by Thailand's integration into the ASEAN Community in 2015, which foregrounded Chiang Rai and the upper Mekong borderlands region, encompassing China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. I have examined the development of Chiang Rai city's road networks and public transport, the Green Bus, and its incorporation into a broader urban network. Through the ethnographic study of road networks and mobility between the two cities of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, on the Green Bus, I have emphasized that the expansion of road networks and the advent of modern transportation since the 2000s have significantly enhanced connectivity between Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai.

Taylor Easum in his work, "Networks Beyond the Nation: Urban Histories of Northern Thailand and

Beyond" (2018), examines the history of the Lanna towns, encompassing Lanna, Chiang Tung, and Luang Prabang, during the post-World War II period, with a focus on the interconnections of religion, trade, and politics. The study underscores the role of Presbyterian missionaries from Chiang Mai in the spread of Christianity to Chiang Rai, a significant development in the modern histories of both cities. Additionally, the Siamese government leveraged the existing Lanna network to assert control over Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. This intricate network, rooted in political, religious, and economic dynamics, has been pivotal in shaping the region's historical trajectory. The reconstruction of Chiang Rai is intricately connected to the historical ties between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. For example, the appointment of a Prince governor from Chiang Mai to oversee Chiang Rai, alongside the expansion of missionary activities into Chiang Tung, significantly shaped the modern development of Chiang Rai. Thus, Chiang Rai's rise as a prominent city in the late 19th century can be understood as a direct consequence of the enduring historical network linking it to Chiang Mai, and Bangkok.

As development advances in the upper Mekong borderlands, the interconnections between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai have become increasingly intricate, leading to a more complex interplay of interactions. The trade and economic systems in this region now heavily rely on mutual dependency. To facilitate the Thai state's expansion of economic trade in the northern region and enhance connectivity with the upper Mekong region, substantial infrastructure investments are essential. This includes the construction of modern road, which both enhance and complicate the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai connectivity. The movement of people—whether for work, services, or travel—and the flow of goods exemplify this interdependence. As Chiang Rai continues to develop, it must reinforce its network with Chiang Mai, the larger city, to achieve full integration within the broader framework of upper Mekong region development.

In this article, I have illustrated that the Green Bus, a public transport service, has become an alternative means for traveling on overland transportation in Northern Thailand, between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai in particular. The Green Bus is both a representative and a vehicle that brings people,

things, and goods to be able to connect with each other of the people who use it. Not only is the Green Bus a part of bringing the wishes, working, traveling, studying, consuming, living in, or moving between cities, the two important cities Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai have a long history on political and economic links through long distance trade and travels. The emergence of Green Bus can be considered as modern transportation, a vehicle that has made people's connectivity more possible. The improvement of Route 118 makes to facilitate increased travel and transportation between Chiang Rai-Chiang Mai and therefore improve more connectivity between Chiang Rai with others cities in the neighboring countries such as Chiang Tung, Bo Kaeo, Luang Namtha and Luang Prabang.

The shortened travel time, enhanced by the Green Bus's public transport operation, increases the potential for people to carry out various activities, such as inter-city transportation for people who travel to pursue education, work, and economic opportunities (in Chiang Mai), but still does not cut them off from their homes (in Chiang Rai). Receiving and delivering parcels of fresh food, fresh flowers, blood sample, or pieces of patient tissue that stores, entrepreneurs, or hospitals need in Chiang Rai, must rely on, more or less, the Green Bus's delivery service from Chiang Mai, as I discussed above. Knowing the results of testing urgently, or being able to conduct transactions of various companies and stores, which still have to rely on the documents and the authorities to approve from the main branch in Chiang Mai, the Green Bus services, not only fulfill most of these requirements, but also satisfy the desire of local peoples from other cities who want to travel, come and consume modernity in big cities, like Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. In sum, roads and buses are more than just things that can be seen concretely and hugely constructed, they play an important role in shaping people's way of life in this changing northern region of Thailand. These social and cultural transformation expand the scope of people's lives and social relations beyond their origins. The traveling practices of people and goods via inter-city road networks, operated by a public transport like the Green Bus, has become an essential aspect of daily life in this region. This underscores the enduring significance of the historical networks and connectivity

between the two historic Tai towns, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, which, ultimately speaking, have responded to changes and demands in the regional development of upper Mekong borderlands.

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