

# **Document Analysis Using Secondary Data of Child Labor in Thailand and Myanmar's Border Areas: When Field Investigation Is Impractical**

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**Discipline**

Political Science and International Relations

**Sub-discipline**

International Security

**Academic Level**

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**Contributor Biography**

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Kong, University of Macau, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, and Chengchi University. He is the author of *On Geo-Cultural Relations Between China and Indo-China Peninsula Countries* (Xiamen University Press, 2016), and *Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar-China Border: Evolutions, Challenges and Countermeasures* (Springer, 2014).

## **Published Book**

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## **Abstract**

This research case describes my use of document analysis for research on child labor in Thailand and Myanmar's border areas (i.e., Thai–Myanmar border, Northern Myanmar's border with China, and Southern Thailand). A nexus between human insecurity and international security, child labor in these areas has been long neglected by researchers. My field investigation on child labor in these areas faced two main obstacles. The first was the prevalence of uncleaned landmines along the Thai–Myanmar border and Northern Myanmar's border with China. The second was the daily occurrence of coordinated attacks against military and civilian targets in Southern Thailand. As a result of the obstacles these factors posed to field investigation, my research project prioritized document analysis (a research method for examining or evaluating documents in both printed and electronic formats), especially document analysis using secondary data, which is a low-cost way to obtain information. Document analysis using secondary data offers researchers a number of advantages. These include providing an effective means to collect data in both digital and printed formats, and reanalyzing pre-existing data collected for the purposes of past research to explore new issues from another point of view, when field investigation for a sensitive case seems impossible or inadvisable.

## **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand the methodological suitability of document analysis using secondary data to, for example, decide which material should be included for a particular project
- Use secondary resources (i.e., news reports, monographs, academic articles, working papers, field reports, and surveys) to evaluate the attitudes, views, and interests of individuals involved in a research project
- Recognize when circumstances would make field investigation impractical, such as when the researcher and/or participants would face serious security threats (e.g., prevalence of uncleaned landmines), or there is unsustainable access to the setting
- Understand the contexts in which document analysis using secondary data would be effective or ineffective
- Understand the obstacles that might be faced in adopting document analysis using secondary data and how to overcome these obstacles

## **Case Study**

### **Project Overview and Context**

Between 2012 and 2018, I spent time studying the issue of child labor in Thailand and Myanmar, particularly on the Thai–Myanmar border, and Northern Myanmar’s border with China, as well as in Southern Thailand. The issue of child labor raises several interrelated questions in the region I studied: What are the dynamics of child labor in Thailand and Myanmar? Is there any way to mitigate the problem of child labor in these border areas? My research aims at exploring the answers to these questions.

At the time of writing, low-intensity conflicts are still occurring in the three border areas in Thailand and Myanmar (i.e., Thai–Myanmar border, Northern Myanmar’s border

with China, and Southern Thailand). In the case of the Thai–Myanmar border, an estimated 120,000 people are long-term asylum seekers (e.g., internally displaced persons and refugees) on the Thai–Myanmar border (UN General Assembly, 2017). Asylum-seeking children from Myanmar began fleeing to the Thailand side of the border in 1975, due to the armed conflicts between the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Army) and ethnic armed groups (The Border Consortium, 2017). Thailand has been a major destination country for asylum seekers from Myanmar (Humanity & Inclusion, 2017).

In Southern Thailand, since 2004, the border provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and part of Songkhla Province have been militarized for years. Many violence-affected children have been victimized by militarization (e.g., excessive use of violence by insurgents and violent retaliation by the Thai security forces). Some children have become a part of the militarization, that is, they are involved with the government-established village defense militias and insurgent groups in the region.

During the past decade, the Myanmar Army (*Tatmadaw*), armed ethnic groups, and border guard forces have been planting landmines as a defensive strategy against their rivals. The landmines along the Thai–Myanmar border and Northern Myanmar’s border with China, as well as the almost-daily attacks against military and civilian targets in Southern Thailand, create obstacles for researchers. The prevalence of uncleaned landmines has a devastating impact on all the field investigation on the borderlands, making it hard to guarantee an exit plan and a backup plan.

To address the lack of security in conducting a field investigation, a potential solution is to hire a local bodyguard or guide. However, a local bodyguard or guide would likely be from one of the parties to the armed conflicts in the region. A researcher who hires a person tied to an armed conflict could unwittingly associate himself or herself with a party to the conflict, and become the target of hostilities and attacks.



I postponed my fieldwork in the borderlands due to the fact that the countries are unable to implement policies or enforce laws in these areas. The scenario of countries being unable to enforce laws in certain areas is known as *limited statehood*. In the case of Thailand and Myanmar, limited statehood of the borderlands is caused by the disputes over autonomy. On Northern Myanmar's border with China and Thai–Myanmar border, the limited statehood is a by-product of the ethnic armed groups' struggle with the Myanmar government for more autonomy. In Southern Thailand, limited statehood was characterized by almost-daily attacks against military and civilian targets, which was caused by the insurgent groups' request for more autonomy. Therefore, the issue of child labor in the three border areas was more complicated than in other areas of Thailand and Myanmar.

## **Research Design**

Although I had originally intended to do field investigation to study child laborers in a cross-cultural context, the security situation made this inadvisable. There were a limited number of data sources regarding child labor in the borderlands and no comprehensive database of these data sources. Nonetheless, I decided to prioritize document analysis using secondary data for my study.

In general, documents can be sorted into two types: primary and secondary. Primary documents provide firsthand information, without interpretation or analysis, such as field notes. Secondary documents refer to products of interpreting or analyzing primary documents collected by others, for a different research purpose. For example, many reports from the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reused the primary documents collected by local reporters or field workers for a new research purpose. Prioritizing document analysis using secondary data was a cost-efficient way to deal with the security concerns hampering my research, although it did not allow me to explore all facets of child labor.

To collect information and data from all the stakeholders, my research mainly relied on the following three sources:

First, news reports, monographs, academic articles, working papers, and reports written in English and Thai languages, which provided background information;

Second, the surveys and reports written by the field workers and researchers of the UN system and NGOs, which provided secondary intelligence of child labor on the Thai–Myanmar border, Northern Myanmar’s border with China, as well as in Southern Thailand;

Third, reports and other publications issued by the authorities in both Thailand and Myanmar, such as the National Research Council of Thailand, and the Central Statistical Organization is under the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Myanmar.

How did I undertake the process for choosing the documents, especially when there are only limited number of data sources (e.g., online resources and other collections in libraries)? The good news is, it would be possible for me to collect almost all the documents and data I required for my research on child labor.

There were particular search terms I used for the searches on electronic databases such as WorldCat. These terms were included, but not limited to, *child trafficking*, *slavery*, *debt bondage*, *serfdom*, *child pornography*, *child beggary*, *child soldier*, *child soldiering*, and *child prostitution*. As a result, I found the titles of many books and articles on child labor, which seemed useful to my research case in the following days.

With regard to the documents and data that were not online, I needed visiting appointment and authorized access to the academic institutions, where documents and data were available, as well as the shared experience and knowledge of experts. At that moment, I used a searchable database named COS Scholar Universe (<http://www.scholaruniverse.com/index.jsp>), and found the profiles of foreign experts, with 2

million profiles of the active full-time faculty around the world. I then contacted them via emails, to carry out indirect interviews, and requested their recommendations for the literature on child labor. Fortunately, some scholars kindly responded to my request. They not only gave me some clues in collecting the English and Thai material, but also reminded me some convincing evidences which are correlated.

## **Obstacles in My Data Collection**

I encountered three unexpected obstacles that influenced the success of my use of document analysis and encouraged me to be flexible with my research schedule.

The first obstacle was how to get the documents and data related to child labor in these borderlands, which are scattered among the libraries of many universities. I'm proficient in Chinese, English, and Thai, which were used in the data sources. However, reading Burmese material, let alone translating it into English, is beyond my ability. In Myanmar, there are few English newspapers (e.g., *New Light Of Myanmar* and *The Myanmar Times*), however. In such a case, it's time-consuming and costly to maintain access to research material.

The next obstacle was the extent to which I understood the population I have been studying, while I have no control over the feelings of others. For example, to my surprise, the Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej died at the age of 88, on October 13, 2016. A year-long period of national mourning was subsequently announced. As a result, my schedule of visiting Thailand had to be changed to a large degree. Many of the Thai professors and scholars I knew, who are experts in the data sources, particularly in analyzing documents written in Thai language, began a 1-year mourning period after the death of the king. It would be inconvenient to disturb these mourners to conduct direct interviews during the mourning period.

The third and final obstacle was how to get fully acquainted with research materials

created by others, and identify what documents would be useful to analyze for my study, particularly when the time is limited. In fact, there is no list that sets out the range of secondary document sources on child labor in these areas or on any given topic a researcher might address.

## **How Did I Respond?**

How did I strive to overcome these obstacles in the course of my research?

Concerning the scattered document and data related with child labor in these borderlands, I tried to overcome this obstacle by visiting the collections and databases. Typically, although archival data sets and academic databases would produce a better accounting of the analytic process, they are often costly for emerging scholars to obtain. Thanks to the visiting appointments issued by the University of Oxford, King's College London, Kyoto University, and University of Macau, I was authorized the access to their library collections, and found many resources in English that allowed for analysis of child labor, including but not limited to ProQuest and Dissertations and Theses, ILO Labordoc, Refworld, ReliefWeb, and Columbia International Affairs Online.

To remedy my lack of knowledge of local communities, my research made full use of Thai materials (e.g., local news reports, monographs, and academic articles). Much of the Thai material that I was unable to gather in field investigation was available in several universities in Bangkok, where access to many books and other material was restricted to registered readers. Despite needing to visit two different universities in Thailand, conducting document analysis using documents written in English and Thai entailed considerable savings in effort compared with gathering firsthand data.

In August 2016 and then in July 2018, as a visiting scholar, I visited Thammasat University and Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, where I spent 6 months (including the time preparing my visits to the two universities) investigating what the Thai government has

done to mitigate child labor on the Thai–Myanmar border, as well as that in Southern Thailand. At that time, I obtained access to material written in Thai language from the research institutes and centers at both universities, which would be not available in many other libraries around the world. During my visits to the two universities, the local newspapers were valuable to my research in two ways. First, local newspapers can rapidly distribute information and opinion. Second, in contrast with the newspapers published in other countries, the local newspapers provided me with more material to evaluate the issue of child labor from different perspectives.

At the same time, I consulted publications issued by the Bangkok-based local and international NGOs, which have been establishing long-term trusting relationships with local communities in the borderlands, through provision of humanitarian aid. In addition to these documents, I expanded my secondary document analysis to include field reports and detailed field notes issued by the UN system (e.g., International Labour Organization and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) and NGOs, which recorded many in-depth interviews, as well as any other records of child labor.

From these fieldwork-oriented publications, I learned more information about the views of the stakeholders, who include but are not limited to parents, community-based organizations, international NGOs and multilateral organizations, children's groups, academics doing research on child labor, national and local authorities responsible for child labor, labor organizations, professionals such as doctors, health workers, lawyers, and social workers. This helped me to understand the continuing efforts of the Thai government in the 21st century that helped more children escape from child labor in the area surrounding the Thai–Myanmar border and the Southern Thailand border.

## **Data Collection**

To analyze the documents, I first had to determine which were best to use in my study, which

entailed a verification process. The verification process included the following steps.

1. I chose to narrow the period to a select time frame in which child labor in the three borderlands occurred, that is, from 1940s to present.
2. I limited the data collection locally (i.e., Thai–Myanmar border, Northern Myanmar's border with China, and Southern Thailand), while ensuring the representativeness of documents.
3. From a deductive perspective, my search began with a group of the keywords used in the literature on child labor.
4. The fourth step is that documents issued and/or analyzed by credible institutes (e.g., Thai and/or Myanmar governments, local and/or international media, and UN system), as well as the documents offered by the local and/or international NGOs were preliminarily considered credible. In general, comparative reliability is a characteristic of the organizations that produced and published the documents and data. These documents compose the vast majority of the literature of the topic I engaged.

The reliability of document and data might be further analyzed using specific measures. For example,

*Reliability in documentary accounts can be evaluated by considering the time spent in the field, the page length of accounts, the number of words or pages given to different topics, and the use of substantiating evidence. Probably the most important indicator of the reliability of documentary accounts is the amount of time the researcher spends in the field. Six months to a year is typically considered the minimum necessary. (Hodson, 1999)*

However, there are some exceptions. For instance, if documents are written in abstractions and generalities, or they do not give detailed and specific examples, they are not credible in my case studies.

With regard to other documents, especially unpublished sources, which refer to any information source that is not officially released by an institute, publishing house, or official authority, were not considered credible.

5. In some cases, some documents may be biased, and there was a divide of opinions on specific cases. Therefore, the fifth step in interpreting the documents is to present the conflicting arguments, if there was a divide of opinions.

In the case of the Southern Thailand, according to the local and/or international media, and UN system, many children were reportedly victims of the violent retaliation by the Thai security forces. In 2014, there was a shocking case—the murder of three Malay-Muslim children in Narathiwat's Bacho District. On February 3, 2014, two paramilitary officers attached with the 46th ranger unit “opened fire at Jehmu Mahman, his pregnant wife and three sons—aged 6, 9 and 11 years-old—as they were about to enter their house after returning from evening prayers.” The three boys were brutally shot dead (“Culture Judged Critical,” 2013). The suspects, Maming Binmama and Saruero Chesae, admitted to the shooting during interrogation. According to the 4th Army Chief Piyawat Nakwanich, “the children's deaths were caused by stray bullets” (Nanuam, 2017). The suspects insisted that “they had acted alone and not on the orders of their superiors.” When they appeared in court, “they retracted their confession and were immediately released on grounds of insufficient evidence” (Pathan, 2017).

Obviously, in this case, there was a divide of opinions. According to the news report published in *Bangkok Post* in 2013, the three boys were murdered by the suspects. Later, in 2017, another news report published in *Bangkok Post* said that the three boys were killed by stray bullets shot by the suspects. The former suggested the tragedy was a “murder,” whereas the latter highlighted that it was a “manslaughter.” Although this called into question the accusation of the suspects, there was a nexus between the two news reports that the three

boys were killed by the bullets shot by the suspects during interrogation. I responded by presenting both arguments, and concluded that some members of the Thai security forces should be responsible for the violence against Muslim children, whether intentional or unintentional.

## **How Did I Analyze the Documents I Gathered?**

The most appropriate method of document analysis depends on research objective and approaches of data collection. In my case, I prefer the method of “interpretation,” which means an act of “clarifying, explicating, or explaining the meaning of some phenomenon” (Schwandt, 2007).

There is no absolute truth, and the context of a situation matters. I agree that a researcher “cannot understand the experiences of another person until he or she has interpreted them” (Denzin, 2001). In most cases, when “you ask them that this is what they think about a particular text, it doesn’t mean that this is what it means to them in their everyday lives” (McKee, 2003). Therefore, interpretation has been a valuable method to contextualize the meaning for better understanding the research findings. For example,

*a violent act has no meaning out of context. In order to interpret such a symbolic act, the reader must know what came before the violence. The reader must also know what followed that action. Once the context is established, the meaning of the act emerges.* (Denzin, 2001)

At the very least, interpretation should be divided into two types, that is, primary interpretation and secondary interpretation. The former refers to “claim(s) made by actors themselves, expressed in speech or text or implicit in other behavior, about how they understand their world, their problems, their relations with others and so on.” Concerning the secondary interpretation, it means “researchers’ account(s) or reconstruction of actors’ primary interpretations, and are inferred from speech, writing and other behavior” (Bellamy,



2012).

## **Practical Lessons Learned**

A number of lessons can be learned from this case, which have changed my approach toward data collection.

A major lesson from my research is the importance of flexibility in research. Although I wanted to conduct my own field investigation, this was not the only way for me to learn about child labor in the border areas. Document analysis using secondary data allowed me to gather information while avoiding the risk of direct face-to-face interviews with child laborers on the Thai–Myanmar border and in Southern Thailand.

The second lesson learned in my research case is, under what circumstances would document analysis using secondary data be ineffective. If I was not proficient in both English and Thai, the method would be ineffective to a large extent.

During the process of my research, the case of the murder of three Malay-Muslim children on February 3, 2014, reminded me that I would be unable to make a judgment, when there was a divide of opinions. As far as I know, there is no official document to identify the murder. So I have to present the conflicting arguments, until there is any document that would definitively say who was guilty. I need to know this for my research on mitigating child labor. If an insurgent group was guilty, my recommendations for mitigating child labor should stress the countermeasures to reduce the insurgent groups' violence against children. If the local armed force was guilty, it's evident that the security governance had loopholes, then my suggestions of mitigating child labor would highlight how to improve the security governance in the borderlands.

The third lesson learned is about interpretation, which could “arise from a need to make comparisons across cases, examine causes and consequences, and answer particular evaluation questions” (Hurworth, 2005). In this regard, interpretation of document and data

would take place throughout the case studies and even after case studies are completed.

## **Conclusion**

Students, whose research projects focus on hard-to-reach areas, individuals, or groups are encouraged to conduct document analysis using secondary data, without making field investigation in the regions affected by armed conflicts. They are not simply collectors of document and data, but interpreters. However, “the interpretative outcomes are not always what the researcher and audience may expect, being sometimes contrary to firm assumptions and expectations” (Roberts, 2007).

## **Exercises and Discussion Questions**

1. Describe a research question you could answer using document analysis using secondary data. What type of secondary documents would you analyze and why?
2. As I mentioned in my research case, it's wise to choose the case, in which the secondary material was written in English or any other languages you are familiar with. Can you think of other circumstances in which document analysis using secondary data, would be ineffective?
3. Of the practical difficulties encountered throughout this case, which were the most challenging in your opinion, and why? How would you respond to the obstacles that I faced?
4. I highlighted the obstacles in my research case, which adopted document analysis using secondary data. What are some of the obstacles that you might face in your proposed research and how do you plan to overcome them? What do you think would be some of the limitations of document analysis using secondary data?
5. What other methods might I have used to explore child labor in the borderlands?
6. In this case, I mentioned how I responded to the obstacles in my research. Given that

time and resources are limited, which countermeasures would you consider most precarious?

7. A verification process is essential in my research case. In the case of your proposed research, what type of verification process would you prefer?

## Further Reading

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## Web Resources

Columbia International Affairs Online, <http://www.ciaonet.org>

COS Scholar Universe, <http://www.scholaruniverse.com/index.jsp>

ILO Labordoc, <http://labordoc.ilo.org/>

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