2011-01-01

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DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.ARV.24.1.4
Available at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv/vol24/iss1/5

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The migration system of low-skilled migrants from northern Thailand to Japan

Akiko Kuwajima¹

“I would like to warn every[one] planning to go overseas to think twice.... Money doesn’t always make life better.” (Assavanonda, *Bangkok Post*, 23 October 2004)

Introduction

In response to the remark of Massy et al. (1994, 1998) that “research into international migration lacks a commonly accepted theoretical framework, which would facilitate the accumulation of knowledge,” Jennissen (2007) constructed a framework incorporating causalities into the international migration systems approach. This article explores a migration system between Thailand and Japan by analyzing case studies in northern Thailand within his framework.

*The international migration systems approach*

In the international migration systems approach, links between the sending and receiving countries (in this case, Thailand and Japan) are examined in political, social, economic, and demographical contexts with a focus on the causes and impacts of international migration from both countries’ perspectives (Kritz et al. 1992).

Jennissen (2007) pointed out that “A disadvantage of this approach is that hardly any causalities are distinguished.” He presented a theoretical framework (Jennissen, 2007: 416; Figure 1) in which four groups of factors act on international migration, namely, economic, social, political and “linkages.”

Countries may belong to more than one migration system. The following sections describe one type of migration flow within the migration system between Thailand and Japan.

Fieldwork in northern Thailand took place in three phases with deep-in-depth interviews of fourteen selected returnees from Japan. The first phase of the fieldwork was conducted in August 2005 at the former Institute of Inter-Ethnic Studies in Chiang Rai Rajabhat University. Information and initial contacts with returnees from Japan were obtained at local NGOs and organizations which work on issues of child prostitution and returnees in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces. In September 2006, the second phase of fieldwork was conducted at Mae Kham village in Mae Chan district, Chiang Rai province. Interviewees were all from this village, and the author was privileged to stay at the home of one of the returnees who was also a head or chief of that village. The last phase of fieldwork was conducted in both Chiang Rai and Phayao provinces in January 2007. The life stories of five returnees appear in an appendix to this article.

The focus of this article is on low-skilled labor migration from
northern Thailand to Japan from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. "Migrants" and "returnees" in this article refer to the interviewees in northern Thailand.

**Economy and international migration**

Thai migrants are generally from the lower or lower middle economic classes. An important economic incentive for migration is the threat of insufficient family income (Jennissen, 2007: 418) and all of the interviewees cited economic problems and poverty as main reasons for migration. Because economic differences between rich and poor countries are widening, more people migrate to find jobs and higher incomes (Martin, 2005: 17). Although GDP in Thailand has been increasing, there is still a great gap between Thailand and Japan. Most of the interviewees had no idea about Japanese language and its society and culture, yet they all knew of Japan as an economically developed country. Thus, higher income in Japan and the image of Japan as a “rich” country attracts many Thai people to seek work in Japan. Upadhyaya (1999: 49) also points out:

There are serious concerns that globalization has been adapted only selectively and that its benefits have been distributed unevenly between the developed and developing countries and between the rich and poor within a country,... The world FDI [foreign direct investment] has been largely localized, with more than 90 per cent of it going to North America, Europe, Japan and some parts of China. The rest of the world, with 70 per cent of its population, receives less than 10 per cent of the world FDI. This has also been referred to mainly resulting from the multinational corporations’ goal to develop their networks and manufacturing capabilities within or close to the regions having a majority of their customers. It appears, therefore, that the poorer nations have not so far been able to reap their due share of the benefits of globalization.

Globalization has also widened the gap between rich and poor, prompting people to migrate to work in economically richer destinations.

Thailand’s agricultural structure has resulted in debt-ridden farmers. Although Thailand has experienced economic growth in
The migration system of low-skilled migrants

the last four decades, a great deal of this growth has come from industrial development. The share of agriculture in GDP declined from 44 per cent in the early 1960s to 10 per cent in recent years. The share of agriculture in total employment fell from 83 per cent in 1957 to 57 per cent in 1999, and in more recent years, it has dropped to around 40 per cent (Ahmad and Isvilanonda 2004). Therefore, there is a supply of low-skilled labor in rural areas where the majority of the people are in the agricultural sector and many of them are eager and ready to take any risks to improve their economic situation. At their destination, most of them take so called 3D jobs (difficult, dirty, and dangerous).

In 1984, Hamilton and Whaley estimated that world GDP could double if barriers to labor migration were removed, and that the economic impact on the receiving countries would be large (Martin, 2002). In Japan, the urban proportion of the population increased from a little over one-third in 1950 to more than three-quarters by 2000 (Douglass and Roberts, 2000: 6). With income and wages rising, foreign migration into urban Japan started in the 1980s against a background of labor scarcities and the rising value of the yen against the dollar. Foreign migrants became an important source of low-cost labor, especially for small and medium-sized manufacturing and construction industries.

Table 1: Remittances to selected Asian countries (US$ million)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>2,756</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>541**</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>191*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>2,891</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>2,222</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>8,400</td>
<td>2,180***</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>7,640</td>
<td>1,718</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Remittances are a source of income for rural people in Thailand and contribute to alleviating rural poverty. In this case study, all of the interviewees sent income to their family members regularly. These remittances were mainly used for living costs, children's education, and repayment of debt. After their return to Thailand, all of them built or renovated their homes. Table 1 shows the amount of remittances to selected Asian countries. Remittances are contributing economical development in Thailand.
Hugo (2005: 28) points out that the above figures do not include the following types of transfers which all appear to be significant.

First, where the migrants bring the money earned back with them when they return. In Indonesia there is a free foreign currency exchange system and no distinction is made between money which is changed in Indonesia by returning workers and that changed by tourists and other foreign visitors.

Second, there is also a considerable amount of batchling of remittances with relatives and close friends bringing back money for workers still in destination areas. There is so much coming and going of workers and the scale of movement from individual villages is so substantial that this method is feasible.

Third, some workers bring back goods (especially gold) rather than cash.

Fourth, there are significant flows using postal transfers.

Fifth, there are several schemes set up by private companies to remit funds for overseas workers, often in association with particular recruitment agencies. In Japan, there is a so-called “underground bank” operating through Thai restaurants. Migrants send money to Thailand through these restaurants with cheaper transfer and commission charges than when using conventional banks. This underground remittance is a very large business. One interviewee in this study used this service. Japanese banks also earn revenue from service and commission charges on migrants’ remittances.

Financial management is crucial for both migrants and their family members left in Thailand. If migrants manage their savings efficiently, they can start a small business after their return. However, some migrants fail to find a job or steady income and end up migrating again. One interviewee migrated to Japan twice since he could not run his new business well after his first migration. Remittances are often wasted on gambling and unnecessary purchasing by family members. One migrant sex worker in Japan committed suicide right after she received a phone call from her family in Thailand that gambling had consumed all her remittances as well as increasing the family’s debt. Financial management is important to make migration successful.
High brokerage fees at the time of recruitment are a major disadvantage for migrants who must work for six months to three years to pay them off. These fees vary case by case but in general have risen as immigration policies in Japan have become more strict since the 1990s. One interviewee reported that the cost had risen from 170,000 baht at the time she migrated in 1995 to 700,000 baht in 2006. These high fees are now considered “normal” by these migrants although they might be cheated. The high fee raises the risk that migration may result in higher debts if the returns are inadequate.

**Linkages between countries and international migration**

It is difficult to identify a particular linkage relevant to this study. However, Japanese investment in Thailand is large, and Japanese nationals form the largest group of work-permit holders. As of February 2008, 24,740 of 122,262 BOI (Board of Investment) and temporary work-permit holders were Japanese, approximately 20 per cent of the total (The Nation, 22 May 2008). Japanese character goods, comic books, movies, and dramas also ensure that Japan is not a totally unfamiliar country for many Thai people. Also, the image of Japan as a rich country attracts migrants. Thai migrants admitted as “trainees” since the early 1980s are another link between the countries.

“Thailand” still does not have strong impact on Japanese in terms of culture and society, even though the number of Japanese tourists to Thailand has increased. More cultural exchanges will bring better understanding on both sides, and contribute to draw more attention of Japanese people to Thai migrants.

**Policy on international migration**

In Japan, historical isolation led to a high degree of cultural homogeneity. The move to a modern nation-state has been based on a notion of ethnic belonging which makes it difficult to accommodate new groups (Castles, 2000: 136). A new linguistic and cultural diversity is seen as a threat to the national culture. Immigration policies which deny civil and political rights to immigrants and put severe restrictions on gaining citizenship are based on the idea that admission of migrants is only a temporary expedient.
In the early 1990s, Japan opened its doors to labor immigrants of Japanese descent (Nikkei-jin), predominantly from Latin America. At the same time, the door was closed on other migrants seeking low-wage work in Japan. Migrants with special and technical skills were encouraged while others were considered "undesirable" (Akashi, 2003). Japanese immigration policy overlooked the fact that there was a demand for unskilled labor in Japan and a supply of potential migrants in nearby countries.

The fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982–1986) encouraged out-migration. In 1997, the Ministry of Labor offered emigration incentives to reduce unemployment. There were no laws to protect Thai migrant workers’ rights until the amended Labor Protection Act of 2008, which prohibited agents from collecting excessive fees and demanded they respect migrants’ rights. However, corruption of Thai officials and police renders these laws and regulations meaningless.

In November 2007, Japan opened up trade in service sectors for Thailand under the Japan-Thai Economic Partnership Agreement (JTEPA). Thai firms were allowed to provide services in 135 areas in Japan including advertising, hotels, restaurants, event organizing, security services, interpreting, caring for the elderly, teaching Thai language and Thai dancing, and spas. Although entry into many of these areas in Japan requires professional qualifications and other conditions, it is expected to bring more opportunities for Thai firms and migrants to work in Japan. However, some categories such as spa-workers and elderly care workers have been earmarked for re-negotiation at a later date. Phongpaichit argues that there is a real fear that some provisions will be meaningless because of the difficulties of meeting safety standards and other qualifications (Bangkok Post, 2 November 2007). Therefore, JTEPA needs to be monitored on its further development.

**Society and international migration**

The social factors affecting migration include culture, social structure, and demography.

**Networks and brokers in Thailand**

Networks have been a powerful force in sustaining migration
The migration system of low-skilled migrants

flows, whatever policies governments adopt. They also contribute to the large numbers of illegal or unauthorized migrants. There are five major channels for Thai workers who wish to go to work in Japan: private employment recruitment agencies registered at the Ministry of Labor; self arrangement; services of the Ministry of Labor; employment as trainee; and recruitment by employers.

Private agencies and self-arrangement account for almost 80 per cent of all annual departures. Governmental services account for less than 5 per cent (Chantavanich et al., 2001: 24). Most interviewees in this study came under self arrangement. Of the fifteen cases (including one who went twice), seven were recruited by a Thai agent, three arranged by relatives, three by friends, and two traveled through legal channels but became overstayers.

Most interviewees in this study disguised themselves as tourists and worked illegally in Japan. Preparation of passports and tourist visas was facilitated by their brokers and recruiters who were mostly their friends and relatives. Between 1996 and 1998, more than 15,000 workers were cheated by unlicensed employment recruiting agencies and illegal brokers (Chantavanich et al., 2001: 24). Many Thai job seekers do not follow legal procedures and thus put themselves at risk of being trafficked.

Ms. Jeab (see appendix) from Mae Kham village in Mae Chan district of Chiang Rai province was recruited by a local agent whose boss lived in Bangkok and was married to Japanese woman. In Phayao province, most recruits were invited by their relatives and friends who had already worked in Japan or who were married to Japanese. In some cases (such as Mr. Yai), recruitment agencies provided false passports and visas. Brokerage fees paid at the time of recruitment varied from 100,000 baht to 500,000 baht. Brokers and recruiters have connections in Japan. Returned migrants have a chance to become agents and earn money from their friends or relatives.

Networks and brokers in Japan

After migrants enter Japan, if they wish to change their jobs for better employment and salary, they need brokers again. Interviewees reported twenty-nine cases of changing jobs in this way. Of these, twenty were helped by friends at no cost, seven got
help from *yakuza* for a fee 50,000 to 150,000 yen, and two managed without any intermediary. Those paying the *yakuza* were mostly new in Japan, while those with more experience were able to get free help from friends.

According to Nagayama's research (1996), it seems that Thais occupy a large group among brokers working inside Japan (table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Total percent</th>
<th>Male percent</th>
<th>Female percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>1,874</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>1,539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>1179</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4827</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>3277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nagayama 1996.

Thai communities have a significant role for Thai migrants in the form of Thai restaurants, hair salons, rental shops for Thai movies and CDs, and so on. One returnee, Mr. Wut established *Thai Chuai Thai* (Thai help Thai), which collected dues of a few thousand yen a month from members for organizing merit-making activities and providing help to those in need. The members also exchanged information on recruitment, health care, and so on.

Most factories and shops where interviewees worked had connections with *yakuza*. In some cases, their bosses were *yakuza* themselves and migrants had to pay *mikajime-ryo* or custody-charge to them every month. By paying this custody-charge, illegal migrants can get protection from *yakuza*.

Prostitution, gambling, and many of the pubs and places of...
entertainment in Japan are controlled by *yakuza* (*Japan Times*, 4 April 2004). Kadokura (2002) estimates that in 2004 the *yakuza's* illegal income was between 1.07 trillion yen and 1.6 trillion yen.

Some female migrants are able to become brokers through marriage to a Japanese, reportedly sometimes by “buying” a Japanese husband for around 700,000 yen. They also thereby get legal status to stay in Japan. One of the interviewees “bought” a Japanese husband and started operating a bar as a *mama-san* or bar-owner. *Yakuza* also act as intermediaries for such arrangements. Migrants can buy not only “husbands” but also other “services” such as housing and cars. Some interviewees owned a car and drove in Japan without a driver’s license. It is unclear how much money is paid for these “services” and what kind of procedures are needed. Accommodation was offered free by some employers, but other interviewees had to pay high rents even though they shared a room with friends. The rents ranged from 40,000 yen to 100,000 yen per month. Since nobody can rent an apartment without legal permission for staying in Japan, apartments are arranged by intermediaries such as a boss or a Thai married to a Japanese.

*Education in Thailand*

The majority of the sample have less than a high-school education and little understanding of the world outside Thailand. This is common in rural areas in Thailand where many villagers have been recruited to work in Japan. There is a great gap in quality and quantity between education in rural areas and urban cities. In villages, access to higher education is not only economically but also geographically difficult. Many secondary school students in rural northern Thailand spend hours traveling to and from school. Some have to abandon education because of inadequate transport. Most of the interviewees left for Japan without any information about Japan nor language skills, and consequently were often easily cheated or became victims of human trafficking.

*Social status after migration*

Economically successful returnees serve as a model for others to work in Japan. All interviewees gained respect from other village people after their return since they became rich. The power of
money is visible and obvious—new houses, land plots, and cars—especially in Phayao province. The roads are lined with beautiful houses, all of them built by returnees. Singhanetra-Renard (1992: 202) describes the class structure in a northeastern village (Chiang Wae in Udon Thani province) as follows:

A class structure also appears to be emerging in Chiang Wae [where there] is now greater differentiation between the rich and the poor than in the past. Largely stemming from international labour migration, influence in the village is now built on money and contacts, not on the charisma or kinship positions that formally distinguished leaders.... [migration] has brought capitalism, incipient class structure, and the influence of money to Chiang Wae more quickly than would otherwise have occurred. Exchange labour (farm families helping each other out during busy agricultural periods) and even religious obligations can now be fulfilled by monetary payments instead of the traditional personal services. Chiang Wae returnees are also making greater investments in their children’s education, which in the longer term should have the effect of further widening the socio-economical gaps.

Even inside a Thai village, the gap between the rich (economically successful returnees) and the poor is remarkable. Chunjit-karuna (2000: 257–8) showed that wealth from remittances and returnees tended to draw communities into the international marketplace. Wealth created a demand for consumer goods in the rural community, and this demand in turn created demand for more money, which encouraged more migration to high-wage destinations.

Parenthood is greatly respected, honored, and supported in Thailand. Most migrants in Japan send money back to their parents and family members as a mark of their “gratitude.” Female migrants who work in the sex industry will usually make substantial financial contributions to their family. Though the job is not considered socially respectable, a woman can still earn respect by demonstrating her “gratitude” toward her parents and family members, or by donating money to temples as merit-making. A temple constructed by a sex worker in Bangkok’s Chinatown (Wat Khanikaphon) is a famous example.
Demographic factors in Japan

Japan's ageing population is a factor draw migration flows from foreign countries. By 2003, those aged 65 or older accounted for 19 percent of Japan's total population. The proportion is projected to reach 26.0 per cent in 2015 and 35.7 per cent in 2050 (Statistics Bureau). As fertility falls, the population of working age (15–34 years) declines (Castles, 2000: 120). According to a UN study (UN, 2001: 54),

The population of Japan aged faster between 1950 and 2000 than the population of other developed countries owing to a rapid process of demographic change that consisted of declines in fertility and increases in survivorship. Under the assumption of zero immigration in the future, the total population as well as the working-age population of Japan is projected to decline continuously during most of the first half of the twenty-century.... [I]f the loss of population were to be prevented through immigration, 17.7 per cent of the population would be composed of immigrants and their descendants by 2050. Similarly, 30.4 per cent of the population would be made up of immigrants and their descendants by 2050 if the country wished to maintain the size of working-age population constant.

Japan will have to accept large number of immigrants to sustain the society in the near future. A Thai woman from Chiang Rai, who migrated to Japan several years ago and married a Japanese man, has established an expanding business providing domestic day-care to elderly people. Hugo (1998) foresees that demographic factors will increase migration flows significantly in the years ahead.

Japanese views of migrants

Japanese authorities view migrants and overstayers as a threat to national unity, identity, cultural homogeneity, and social order. They oppose permanent residence. This view is partly derived from Japanese mass media reports on social problems caused by foreign workers, following the recent flow of foreign workers to Japan and an overall increase in the crime rate. In 1992, for example, Japanese newspapers ran several articles on crimes committed by Thai workers (Chantavanich et al., 2000: 269). As a result, Japanese authorities have tightened controls on illegal workers and deported
anyone found working illegally in Japan.

The Japanese people’s image of migrants or overstayers is generally negative. Anything “illegal” is considered dangerous and potentially criminal. Japanese people thus have difficulty understanding the reality of Thai migrants in Japan.

The number of Thai wives and children in Japan is increasing, though the total numbers are not as high as those of Chinese. The increasing number of registered foreign nationals raises concerns over their children’s education and citizenship.

Living and working conditions and views of Japan

Most male migrants in this study were employed in small and medium-sized businesses while the females worked mainly in the service sector as bar girls, hostesses, and so on. Most worked hard, often without any holidays and weekends, and faced many hazards at work—risks of height and heat in construction work, and chemical substances in factories. Many had been injured and hospitalized. Overwork had proved fatal for some. They had to bear all medical expenses by themselves since they had no social security and insurance. The most serious problem for illegal migrants was their status as “illegal” overstayers.

Some migrants are “lucky” to find a good boss and decent working environment, but others suffer discrimination and brutality. They may be suspected of petty crime in the workplace just because they are “illegal.” Sex workers sometimes suffer violence and sadism. Female factory workers are forced to suffer sexual harassment because they risk losing their jobs or being reported to police.

Most had no Japanese friends. Their lives in Japan were confined to the workplace and Thai community. Holidays were spent inside their home since they were afraid of being arrested. The Japanese in their world are only “colleagues, bosses, and yakuza.”

In one survey (see table 3), only 27 percent of Thai migrants had a favorable image of Japan, yet 62 percent wanted to stay in the country. The desire for economic gain overrides the dangers and discomforts. Yet this negative image will affect the relationship between Thailand and Japan in the future. The fact that migrants’
living space is limited and they have little chance to communicate or interact with other Japanese people contributes to these perceptions.

Table 3: Desire to settle and views of Japan (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average years stay</th>
<th>Desire to settle</th>
<th>Views of Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino*</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese*</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Korean</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazilian</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Recalculated after excluding no answers.


Conclusion

In Japan, not only Japanese but also Thai migrants have died of karou-shi or overwork. Debate on migration has tended to focus on sex workers and child labors, neglecting the conditions of other migrants. Most Japanese would never imagine that foreign workers could die of overwork. In their perception, such people are “illegal overstayers” or potential “criminals.” This clouded perception arises because the migration system is invisible to most Japanese people.

The migration system between northern Thailand and Japan has been created by the gap between Japanese immigration policy on one side and the realities of the labor market on the other. Japan lacks labor while northern Thai villages have a surplus of low-skilled laborers with dreams of becoming rich. Various networks of relatives, friends, and criminal gangs conspire to fill this gap.
Figure 2: Simplified plan of low-skilled labor migration flows between northern Thailand and Japan

Notes: Filled in nothing (or blank) shaped objects for “legal” status holders; and filled in black ones for “illegal” status holders; icon ○ indicates an individual (female) who held a legal status throughout her stay in Japan by getting married to Japanese; icon △ indicates an individual who (also female) also went over the same process as icon ○, however, after her return to Thailand, he/she became a broker, inviting his/her friends/relatives to go to work in Japan; icon □ indicates an individual who became overstayer after his/her tourist visa expired; and his/her migration was successful economically and became a broker after his/her return to Thailand; icon of pentagram indicates an individual who went over the same process as above (icon □), however, he/she did not play a role as a brother after his/her return to Thailand; and Icon ◆ indicates an individual who became overstayer after his/her tourist visa expired; and his/her migration was not successful and came back to Thailand without any economical gains (includes those who became sick).

In order to enter to Japan, Thais have to depend on brokers and criminal underground agencies since the legal channels for low-skilled laborers have been closed. They enter on tourist visas and end up as “overstayers”, who are treated as “criminal” since they stay in Japan illegally. Recruiters and brokers, who are often friends
and relatives married to Japanese, squeeze large fees from migrants. The high rate of profit is an incentive for brokers to find more migrants. Authorities blame the migrants for illegal entry, while the brokers escape unscathed.

Each migrant has a potential to be a future broker. Yet the risks associated with work in Japan are high because of the illegal status, lack of access to social security and adequate health care, and possibility of being left with a large debt if arrested and deported. Migration is a high-risk high-return business.

Moreover, if the migrant succeeds and returns, does his or her life improve? Almost all interviewees responded that they had no problems after their return. Yet the long separation can bring about family crisis because of extramarital relationships, polygamy, divorce, and stateless children. One returnee, Mr. Wut, mentioned that he sometimes had a strange feeling toward his own parents since he had been apart from them for such a long time. Most migrants leave their home country to help their family, but sometimes their migration results in the family breaking up.

Poverty was the prime reason for most Thai migrants to go to work in Japan. Some were so desperate that they jumped on the airplane without due consideration of what lay ahead. This desperation makes migrants easy targets of human trafficking. Many are ignorant of the immigration rules of both Japan and Thailand, and have no idea how to appeal to government agencies or local government for help when their human rights are abused.

Successful returnees provide a model encouraging others to work in Japan in order to support their families and improve their own living standards.

Although Japan is trying to exclude low-skilled labor, the realities of the demography and labor market mean that the country needs immigrants to sustain the society. In other words, Japan will have to become a more culturally diverse country, not the "one-ethnic country" which the government imagines. Preparation for this change will be needed. The experience of European countries should be studied (Yomiuri Shimbun, 5 August 2008) since they have had programs of social integration since the late 1990s including language education, job training, recruitment assistance, and consultation services.
Lastly, many Thai immigrants have negative views toward Japan because they live in a confined society in Japan where social security is vulnerable and the opportunity for interaction with ordinary Japanese is limited. This is not healthy for either side in the long run.

Notes

1 I would like to thanks all returnees who kindly shared their experiences in Japan, especially Mae Luang of Mae Kham village whose story inspired me to work further on migration issues. This article is an updated version of my MA thesis on ‘Thai labor migration to Japan and its Impact: A case study of Thai immigrants from a northern village.’ The third phase of fieldwork was part of a project on “Transnational Labor Migration in East Asia” funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, in which I was privileged to work closely with Prof. Dr. Supang Chantavanich whose insights and guidance were invaluable. The article is dedicated to all Thai migrant workers in Japan.

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**Appendix: Life stories of five selected cases**

**Ms. Jeab**

It was when Ms. Jeab lost her parents and husband that she decided to go to work in Japan. She had three little children and was burdened with a lot of debt. In her village (Mae Kham in Mae Chan district, Chiang Rai province), there was a well-known Thai recruiter who had assisted many people to work overseas in Australia, Taiwan, and Japan. His boss was based in Bangkok and married to a Japanese woman. Ms. Jeab was recruited by him for a total brokerage fee of 170,000 baht, which she paid in advance by borrowing money from a bank. It took around a month to finish all preparations (tourist visa and passport). In 1995, when she was 39 years old, she migrated to Japan with her elder brother who was also recruited by the same recruiter.

Her first job was to collect eggs at a poultry farm in Ibaraki prefecture. She earned 400 yen per hour. Since a dormitory was arranged by the factory, she did not need to pay any money on accommodation. After she worked there for four months, she was introduced to a new job by her friend and worked at a concrete plant in Saitama prefecture for the rest of her stay in Japan. She earned 500 yen per hour with an allowance for overtime work. Her job was to deal with recycled concrete which was sometimes dangerous because of high heat and chemical substances, so that she had to be careful to avoid injury at work. Since the factory also provided her a free dormitory, she could save and send lots of money to her family in Thailand. She worked hard there from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. without weekends. She sometimes had small trips.
and parties with her colleagues to hot springs, karaoke, and picnics under cherry blossoms. She had no problem with her boss and colleges who were kind to her, although she had to pay mikajime-ryo or custody-charge to her boss (around 20-30 percent of her monthly income) as her boss had a connection with yakuza.¹

After two years in Japan, her elder brother who migrated with her became sick (he had a different job in another prefecture). He went to hospital and was diagnosed for heart disease. He was also told that he would die in two years. Upon this diagnosis, his factory deported him back to Thailand and he did die in two years. Ms. Jeab felt angry toward her brother’s factory but could not take any action since her status in Japan was illegal ( overstayer) and she was scared of being arrested. She had one younger brother in Thailand, however, who committed suicide in sadness over his elder brother’s death. Ms. Jeab received this tragic news in Japan. Two brothers’ deaths was the most difficult thing that happened to her during her stay in Japan. She lost all her family members except her three small children.

The most crucial problem she experienced in Japan was her status as an “illegal” migrant. The fear of being arrested was always with her so that she went out as little as possible. Even if she was sick, she could not go to hospital because she had no insurance and social security. Instead, she took medicine which she brought from Thailand. Although her image of Japan is positive since she had a good boss and colleagues, she also witnessed various tragic cases of Thai migrants, including those who died from overwork; committed suicide; used up their income in gambling (pachinko), or were infected by HIV and deported to Thailand. She also learned from her friends in Japan that at some factories, foreign migrants (especially those who were overstayers) were treated badly with violence. They had no ways to protect themselves from violence and discrimination at the workplace.

After seven years, she thought that she had enough money and decided to return to Thailand. She reported to the Immigration Bureau and was deported to Thailand. She built a new house and purchased a new car and land. Currently she is a village chief. Since she had no time for merit-making in Japan, she became a nun for a few months for consolation to her deceased two brothers.
Mr. Kham lived in the same village as Ms. Jeab. In 1993 he decided to go to work in Japan. At that time, he had already married and sired two children. His finished his education up to the fourth grade. Financial need was the main reason that drove him to work abroad. Also, he thought that he would need more money for the education of his children. Although he had no idea about Japan, a friend suggested he go there. The recruiter was the same as for Ms. Jeab. The brokerage fees were 250,000 baht. He borrowed money from a bank at 10 percent interest to pay the brokerage fees in advance. It took three months to complete all arrangements (tourist visa).

On the way to Japan, he was introduced to a Thai man who worked in Japan as a cook (and who came back to Thailand to accompany Mr. Kham). After the arrival at Narita airport, a Thai woman married to a Japanese was waiting for them, and took Mr. Kham to Ibaraki prefecture.

His first job was dicing fish at Orai-cho in Ibaraki prefecture. Salary was around 200,000 yen per month (700 yen per hour), and he worked from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. He shared an apartment room with four Thai workers at a cost of 30,000 yen per person per month including charges for water, gas, and electricity. He worked there for five months. Since his boss was yakuza, he had to pay mikajime-ryo or custody-charge every month. The arrangement for the next job was done with the help of a Thai man he met in Japan. He paid 150,000 yen to him as a brokerage fee.

Next, he worked on construction in Saitama prefecture, earning 10,000 yen a day, around 300,000 yen a month, building a road from Saitama prefecture to Yamanashi prefecture (near Mt. Fuji). The project lasted around eighteen months. He shared an apartment with his friends at a cost of 20,000 yen per person per month. After the road construction had finished, he remained near Mt. Fuji and got another construction job for 8,000 yen a day. Since he was provided a dormitory room, he did not need to pay rent. After around four years, construction jobs were in decline. He was introduced to a new job by a Thai friend for no charge.

His third job was making gasoline containers in Shimizu city, Shizuoka prefecture for 240,000 yen a month. He shared an
apartment room with his friends at a cost of 30,000 yen per person per month. He had two Thai co-workers there, however, they had quarrels all the time. His boss (who was *yakuza*) decided to separate them and in the end Mr. Kham had to move to another place with one of the two co-workers. He worked at Shimizu city for ten months.

His Shimizu boss found him his next (and last) job on construction in Yamanashi prefecture. He earned 12,000 yen a day and stayed at a dormitory which was free and close to his new boss’s place. He worked there for five years.

The relationship with his colleagues and boss was relatively good, though he was sometimes scolded by his boss, which was unpleasant. Also, it was hard for him to accept the culture of *sake* or Japanese alcohol, and he found it stressful to go drinking after work with his Japanese colleagues. His image of Japan, however, is positive because he found Japanese to be hard workers. He also had a positive attitude towards *yakuza* as some were even kind to him. The other problems in Japan were loneliness and homesickness. His case was exceptional since when he became sick, his boss took him to a hospital and also paid for him. He also mentioned that he was impressed by the kindness of the Japanese doctor.

On rainy days, he could not work and make money but sometimes had part-time jobs or engaged in cleaning and gardening work for his boss. He sometimes made small trips with his colleagues. He also mentioned that there was a Thai community in Japan in which people helped each other and exchanged information. As for merit-making, he sometimes visited temples and donated money with his Thai friends.

After working in Japan for total of around thirteen years (1992 to 2006), he decided to return since he felt he was getting old. He reported to the Immigration Bureau in Japan and was deported to Thailand. Before reporting, he contacted a Thai agent who arranged him a new Thai passport for 9,000 yen.

He sent 20,000 baht to Thailand every month via banks and brokers. At the time of leaving Japan, he had savings of 400,000 to 500,000 yen. He bought a house, land, and car with this money. Currently, he works as a farmer and a gardener in Chiang Rai province. The reintegration process is going on in a positive way,
however, his left eye has a problem because of the hard work while he was in Japan. At the end of the interview, he cautioned that married persons should not go abroad to work because their marriages would easily break up. He had witnessed various cases among his friends. Since he engaged in construction work for many years in Japan, he acquired skills and know-how about construction work as well as Japanese language (especially speaking and listening), but he had no chance to apply these skills in Thailand.

Ms. Jasmine

Ms. Jasmine lives in Phayao province. She completed her education up to fourth grade. She married and had two children but her husband passed away. When she became heavily indebted and could not even afford her daily expenditure, a female friend who used to live in the village invited her to work in Japan. This Thai friend had married a Japanese and stayed in Japan. Jasmine had no idea about Japan but hoped to earn a lot of money there.

She arranged passport and visa with the help of this friend for a brokerage fee of 100,000 baht. It took one month to complete all arrangements, with a tourist visa. She borrowed money from a bank with land as security. She left Thailand in 1992 and her friend picked her up at Narita airport.

Her first job was a chef's assistant in Kanagawa prefecture. She worked from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and earned 5,600 yen a day. She shared an apartment with her friends at a cost of 40,000 yen per person per month. She worked there for around six months.

She changed her job on her friend's recommendation and became a cleaner at a hotel in Kanagawa prefecture. She stayed at the same apartment, but earned only 2,600 yen a day at this job. She sometimes had to borrow money from her Thai friends. She worked there for a few months.

Her third job was to cut pigs into small parts at a slaughter house in Kanagawa prefecture. She was again introduced to this job by her friend. She earned 800 yen per hour, and total monthly income was around 200,000 yen.

Next, she became an electronic device assembler at a computer factory in Kanagawa prefecture. She also got this job via her Thai friend. Income was better than the previous job as she earned 850
yen per hour. She still stayed at the same apartment.

Finally, she got a job as a snack-girl at a bar in Kanagawa prefecture, earning 8,000 yen a day. She worked there for around two years, met a Japanese boyfriend, and married him.

She learned Japanese by herself. She is good in speaking, reading, and writing now. She felt that she became more polite since she came to Japan. Her image toward Japan is positive as Japan is an orderly, clean, and modern country. When she had holidays in Japan, she sometimes traveled and she especially loved to see cherry blossoms. She also enjoyed pachinko (gambling) a few times a month. When she was sick, she normally bought medicine at a pharmacy.

After marrying in 1997, she returned to Thailand temporarily to obtain a spouse visa. She was in Thailand for two years from 1997 to 1999, and did not work. After she got a permanent visa, she left for Japan. She stayed with her Japanese husband until 2005 as a non-working housewife. Although she was looked down on by Thai people in Japan, after she got married to Japanese, these people changed their attitude toward her. She sent 50,000 yen per month to Thailand.

Although she wanted to stay in Japan longer, she and her Japanese husband decided to move to Thailand in 2005. One of the reasons is that the living cost is cheaper. She bought land and a house where she started a small beauty shop, now managed by her daughter. She and her husband do not work now.

Her life totally changed after her migration to Japan. The attitude of village people toward her also changed. She felt that she earned more respect from village people because they believed that she became rich. However, she had a problem with her two children because they were apart for long time. It was also observed that her family has been going through a challenging time because her Japanese husband cannot speak Thai and her two children cannot speak Japanese.

She wants to get back to Japan again and work there because the income is better than in Thailand, and because she had fun when she was there. Her suggestions to those who would like to work in Japan were that they should be honest and diligent and should learn Japanese before going to Japan.
Mr. Wut

Mr. Wut lives in a small village of Phayao province. He had a relatively high educational background (vocational certificate) compared to other interviewees. His case was unique since he had visited Japan several times already. He worked in a motorcycle company which sent him to Japan as a buyer. He had been back and forth between Thailand and Japan for four years. His company arranged a tourist visa every time they sent him to Japan. At the last visit on company business, he became an illegal migrant.

He had already established contacts and connections with Thai people in Japan on earlier visits. He found a gardening job in Ibaraki prefecture through a friend in Japan. Salary was 300,000 yen per month, though five percent of this was deducted each month as a so-called "tax" to his boss. He stayed at his boss's apartment for free with his friends. He had holidays when it rained (four to five days a month). The relationship with his boss was relatively good, though he was scolded sometimes when he made mistakes. He also had a part-time job and did small chores for his boss in his last few years in Japan.

His status as an "illegal migrant worker" caused him problems, such as difficulty over medical care. However, in Ibaraki prefecture, there is a hospital where receives migrant workers from various countries, though it costs a lot as the illegal migrants have no insurance. He also went to this hospital only when his sickness was intolerable (normally he took medicines and rested). He and his friends set up an organization called Thai Chuai Thai (Thai help Thai) to help Thai people who have problems in Japan. Members pay a few thousand yen per month, and the money was used to help Thai migrants who were in difficulty. There were about thirty members as of 2006. As for merit-making, he sometimes went to Pak Nam Temple near Tokyo. He learned Japanese, and gained some knowledge and skills on gardening.

After fifteen years, he was arrested for driving a car without a license and deported to Thailand in 2006. His total remittance was around 5.5 million yen which was sent via a bank or broker-service run through a Thai restaurant in Kashima city. His savings at the time of his return to Thailand were about three million yen. He bought a car and built a new house in Thailand. He does not work
now. Since he worked in Japan for many years, he had no interest in working there anymore. He mentioned that the reintegration process had been going well. However, he does not have friends in Thailand and feels lonely. He also sometimes gets a strange feeling toward his own parents because they have been apart for a long time. He even felt that he was an “alien” in his hometown since the landscape and environment had totally changed.

His migration to Japan was economically successful. He invited his father to travel in Japan for one month while he was in Japan. He had invested, along with Japanese friends and a Thai female friend who married to a Japanese, in a Thai restaurant with massage services attached. He now works as a recruiter.

At the end of the interview, he mentioned that although the “illegal” status was troublesome for migrant workers there, they could earn more than those working as “legal” migrants such as trainees. This was a factor that attracted Thai village people to work in Japan even though they have to take risks as “illegal” workers.

Mr. Yai

Mr. Yai has three children and lives in the same village as Mr. Wut in Phayao province. He completed his education up to the seventh grade. Poverty was the main reason that he decided to work in Japan as he needed money for his three children. A son of his father’s friend worked in Japan, and with this connection, Mr. Yai was invited to work there. His image of Japan was positive as a developed and civilized country. He borrowed 220,000 baht from a bank for his preparation for migration, including visa and passport arrangements. All preparation was completed in one week. He left Thailand for Japan in 1990 when he was 38 years old. At Narita airport, the son of his father’s friend picked him up and brought him to Sendai in Miyagi prefecture by bullet train.

In Miyagi, he worked for three months as a painter of signboards, earning 220,000 yen per month. His boss also paid for his living costs, including accommodation and meals. At the workplace, there were two other Thai workers. However, since they quarreled often, he and one other were moved to Nagoya prefecture.

In Nagoya, he worked on a stock farm for around five years.
Accommodation and living costs were free and he earned 250,000 yen per month plus bonus. He sent around 200,000 to 220,000 yen to Thailand every month. His boss again, kindly transferred those remittances on his behalf.

When his mother became sick, he decided to return to Thailand in 1996. With his accumulated savings of around two million baht, he set up a cartoon company called *Chulian*, but it did not last long. He started a rice polishing service which also faltered. He decided to go back to Japan. As he had been deported, he could not use his passport to re-enter Japan. Through an agency, he bought a passport and visa of another Thai person who looked similar to him for 500,000 baht. Since he already knew about Japan, he traveled by himself, and took a taxi from Narita airport to Ibaraki prefecture where he found a job through the same agency.

He worked at a sand plant in Ono, Kashima city in Ibaraki prefecture. Salary was 190,000 yen per month. He rented an apartment which cost around 130,000 yen per month including charges for water, gas, and electricity. His boss was *yakuza* but he did not have to pay any protection charge to him. When he had holidays, he went fishing and sometimes sold seafood to earn extra income. Since there were a lot of holidays at this factory, he was suggested to change this job by his relative who was also working in Japan. He worked at this factory for one year.

His second job was at a packing factory called *Maruto* in Taiyo town, Kashima city, Ibaraki prefecture. He earned 230,000 yen per month. His relative helped him find a cheaper apartment. However, the packing job was hard without holidays. His boss was a *yakuza* and a foul-mouthed person. After he worked there for one year, he injured his fingers and quit the job.

His last job was to grow *oba* (green perilla) leaves in Asahi village, Kashima city, Ibaraki prefecture for around four years. He got this job through his friend. He earned 200,000 yen per month without any holidays. Accommodation was the same as before. He sent 50,000 to 60,000 yen to Thailand every month.

Through working in Japan for around twelve years in total, he learnt Japanese language and how to use machines. Especially in agriculture, he learned how to use modern machines, but has had no chance to make use of his skills in Thailand because there are no
such modern machines in his village. His image of Japan has not changed much even after working in Japan for many years. He was impressed by the difference in the agricultural sector between Thailand and Japan. Japanese farmers have been well supported by government and could make good earnings.

His most serious problem in Japan was that it was hard to go to hospital since illegal migrants had to pay expensive charges. However, when he went to see the dentist because of toothache, he was impressed by the kindness of the dentist who reduced the charges because he was an illegal migrant. Regarding merit-making, he sometimes donated money to temples with his Thai friends.

As he was a hard worker and his boss’s favorite, some co-workers were jealous. The wife of one co-worker reported him to the police and he was deported. On return, he had savings of around 600,000 to 700,000 yen. He set up a company to grow litchi and polish rice. He felt that he earned more respect from village people after he got back from Japan.

He claimed he had no problems in reintegration, but he brought back a Thai girlfriend from Japan who became his so-called “second-wife,” so it seems his earlier marriage had broken down.

He suggested that anyone with a job in Thailand should not hanker after working in Japan which requires separation from the family and a hard struggle to integrate into a new society. Those who do decide to go, however, should be diligent and try to learn Japanese.

Notes

1 The exact number of *yakuza* is unknown. Police estimate that there are 40,000, however, unofficial counts by experts totally as many as 80,000 (*The Japan Times*, 14 February 2007).

2 His bosses at the first, third and last jobs were *yakuza*.

3 The same was true for one of the other interviewees of this case study.

4 This hospital prepared a “list of sicknesses” for migrants who cannot speak Japanese or English well. There is a Thai version so that Mr. Wut could tell the doctor about his condition.