Thai migrants in Japan: Experience and return

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Introduction

Globalization and demographic trends indicate that migration across borders will greatly increase in the coming decades. A significant characteristic of the international migration flow is an increasing number of “irregular” migrants. Another important trend is the growing flow marked by trafficking in persons and human smuggling. A proportion of irregular migrants consist of “economic” or “labor” migrants. Many are pushed out of their countries due to poverty and exploitation, but others leave for better opportunities in the countries of destination. The global dynamics today have led to an increasing number of people on the move. In 2000, an estimated 168 million people were living outside their country of origin, an increase from 75 million in 1965.

The overseas migration of Thai labor did not start in significant numbers until 1975. Initially, there were more male than female migrant workers. From 1990 until the present, the Thai female migrant labor force has been increasing exponentially. In the 1990s, there was a shift in the Thai migration pattern from West Asian countries to emerging new destinations within Asia (Chantavanich, 2001: 171–2). In 2004, the total number of Thai workers working abroad was 148,596, of which 121,200 were male and 27,396 female. The number of Thai workers abroad classified by countries was as follows: the largest group of 69,982 went to Taiwan; 11,338 to Singapore; 10,647 to South Korea; 10,611 to Israel; 5,857 to Japan; 5,853 to Malaysia; 5,680 to Brunei; and 4,126 to Hong Kong (TOEA, 2005). These are the statistics for documented workers. The exact number of undocumented workers remains uncertain, particularly Thai migrants in Japan.

Information from the Bank of Thailand shows that the remittances sent by Thai migrants working abroad amounted to 59,251 million baht (US$ 1,481 million) in 2002. The amount of
remittances transferred from Japan was 4,204 million baht (US$ 103 million), the third highest of all destinations. This amount increased to 66,297 million baht (US$1,657 million) in 2003 (Bank of Thailand, 2004; see table 1).

Table 1: Remittances to Thailand through the banking system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baht (million)</td>
<td>56,910</td>
<td>67,936</td>
<td>55,606</td>
<td>59,251</td>
<td>66,297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ (million)</td>
<td>1,423</td>
<td>1,698</td>
<td>1,390</td>
<td>1,481</td>
<td>1,657</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bank of Thailand and Thailand Overseas Employment Administration Office, 2004

When the migrants return home, they are unable to use the skills and knowledge that they gained abroad to apply for new jobs or transfer them for education credits in Thailand because Thailand has no program to support Thai returnees (Chantavanich, 2001: 192–3). The literature also reports that many return with no personal savings. Others who do have money usually do not know how to invest carefully and efficiently. Many more return to face broken families or have become strangers to their children. After they spend all their savings from abroad in a few months, they usually decide to work abroad again. Research suggests that migrants who work abroad should set clear goals on how to spend their savings from abroad efficiently when they return home (Chantavanich, 2003; Angsuthanasombat, 1999: 67–8).

Labor migration has become a significant feature of the modern day development process and strongly influences social relationships, politics, and economics. Migration is a major concern as there are many people who would like to work abroad. A reintegration program is an alternative and important approach to assist these people in becoming aware of problems and finding solutions. If they would like to work abroad, they should plan and prepare well for each stage, from the pre-departure stage until their return. A reintegration program will be able to protect migrants and assist returnees to resettle more efficiently and to enjoy a better quality of life once they return.
Methodology

The study focused on a group of both documented and undocumented Thai migrants in Japan. The period of the study was nine months from December 2004 to September 2005. The objective was to study the situation of Thai labor migrants before they returned to Thailand—their skills and experiences in Japan, remittances, processes of return such as planning, problems and needs for their return, and reintegration in Thailand. Qualitative research was based on in-depth interviews, focus groups with Thai migrants in Japan, and key informants. Quantitative research was done using a questionnaire for Thai migrants.

This study was based on interviews with sixty-seven Thai immigrant workers in Japan. Twelve are documented and fifty-five are undocumented (temporary visitors and trainees who overstayed and trafficked persons). Snowball sampling was used to reach target groups by sex, age, legal status, occupation, period of stay, prefecture, and problems. The interviews took place in ten prefectures: Tokyo, Kanagawa, Yamanashi, Saitama, Gunma, Nagano, Aichi, Tochigi, Chiba, and Ibaraki. The interviews were done in residences, Thai communities in Yamanashi and Gunma, working places, shelters, prisons, hospitals, and the Thai embassy. The key informants were from the embassy, Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice, Thai temples, volunteers of the Thai embassy in various prefectures, Thai communities in Gunma and Yamanashi, academics, and fifteen NGOs.

Thai migrant workers in Japan

Thai migrant workers in Japan are mostly illegal. Those who had legal status came to Japan with trainee visas, two year contracts, or temporary visitor visas, working as domestic helpers with one year contracts, which they could renew with their employers. Most domestic helpers worked longer than five years, with the longest staying in Japan as a domestic worker for nineteen years. Those who had illegal status mostly came to Japan with trainee visas and temporary visitor visas and then overstayed to work as daily wage workers, factory workers, and sex workers. Additionally, there is also female trafficking for sex industry work.
Foreign nationals residing in Japan

The number of registered foreign nationals categorized by nationality at the end of 2003 was 1,915,030, an increase from 1,851,758 in 2002 (Immigration Control, 2004: 26-7). The largest number was 613,791 from Korea, followed by China (462,396), Brazil (274,700), the Philippines (185,237), Peru (53,649), Thailand (34,825, accounting for 1.8 percent), Vietnam (23,853), and Indonesia (22,862).

The number of new entries of foreign nationals with trainee status increased by 6,283 (10.7 percent) from the previous year and reached 64,817 in 2003, marking an all-time high. Looking at the statistics by region, the number of Asians has been on the rise reaching 59,501 in 2003 and accounting for 91.8 percent of the total, followed by Africa (1,621) and South America (1,250). By nationality (place of origin), the largest number came from China at 38,319 in 2003, accounting for 59.1 percent of the total, followed by Indonesia (5,597), Viet Nam (4,028), the Philippines (3,618), and Thailand (3,119, accounting for 4.8 percent), increased 13.9 percent from a year earlier in 2002 (Immigration Control, 2004: 13–4; Office of Labor Affairs in Japan, 2005: 7).

Illegal foreign workers

The estimated number of overstayers (those who illegally stay in Japan beyond the permitted period of stay without obtaining permission for an extension or change of status of residence) was 219,418 as of 1 January 2004. The largest number was from R.O. Korea (46,425 accounting for 21.2 percent), followed by China (33,522), the Philippines (31,428), Thailand (14,334, accounting for 6.50 percent, with 6,148 male and 8,186 female), Malaysia (8,476), Taiwan (7,611), and Indonesia (7,246). The number of overstayers from Thailand had steadily decreased from May 1993. Most of the Thai overstayers had a residential status of temporary visitor with some as trainee.

The largest number of overstayers originally had status as temporary visitor (150,326, 68.5 percent of the total), followed by entertainer (11,974), pre-college student (9,511), college student (6,672), and trainee (3,959). Most of the Thai overstayers had temporary visitor status with some trainees. The estimated number

In 2003, the largest number of deported foreign nationals were deported from Tokyo (39.6 percent), followed by other big cities such as Saitama, Kanagawa, Chiba, Aichi, Osaka, Ibaraki, Gunma, and Nagano. The number of deported foreign nationals from these ten cities made up 86.3 percent of the total. Mostly, the deportees were aged between 20 and 39 years old (70.1 percent). There were more males than females for the group aged 25 years and up. However, there were more females than males for the 25 years old and younger age group. The report found that 47.8 percent worked longer than three years while 30.6 percent worked longer than five years. The number of deportees with low income (below 7,000 yen or US$ 63 a day) shows a declining trend, while the numbers with higher income are on the increase. Most deportees worked with small enterprises and one owned a family business (Office of Labor Affairs in Japan, 2005: 14).

**Trafficked Thai women**

The late 1970s and early 1980s were the beginning of large-scale trafficking of women into Japan from Thailand, the Philippines, and other countries in Southeast and East Asia. The trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan involves a wide range of actors: the initial recruiter who contacts the women; the agent in Thailand who pays the recruiter, arranges travel documents, and holds the women until they are ready to leave; the escorts who accompany the women to Japan, often via other countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, or South Korea; the brokers who meet the women upon their arrival and pay the agent for delivering them; and the procurers who run the sex establishments and pay large sums of money to the brokers for the acquisition of the women. When trafficked women arrive in Japan, they are taken to a broker who negotiates their job placement arrangements. The women themselves have no input in this process, no opportunity to select or refuse an employer or a voice in setting the terms of the “contract” (Human Rights Watch, 2000; Dinan, 2002: 4–5; Ruenkaew, 2001: 9–10).
Background of Thai migrant workers

Sixty-seven people were interviewed including thirty-five males and thirty-two females. The majority were older than 30 with an average age of 41 years. Twenty three persons or 34.3 percent of respondents were from the 40–49 age group, while 31.3 percent were in the range of 30–39 years old. However, the age range of the total sample was from 19 years (two persons) to 60 years (two persons). One of the 60 year old respondents had stayed in Japan for nineteen years. She had come to work as a domestic helper when she was 41 years old. The other 60-year old respondent came to work in Japan when he was 46 years old. He now stays illegally and works as a daily wage worker.

Regional origin, status, education, work in Thailand

Twenty-eight persons, comprising 41.8 percent of the total sample, came from the northern and northeastern regions, seven respondents (10.4 percent) from the central part, and four respondents (6.0 percent) from Bangkok. Those from the north were mainly female in the 30–39 age range, while those from the northeast were mostly male and in the 40-49 age group.

Nineteen (28.4 percent) were either single or had left their spouses behind in Thailand. Fourteen were divorced (20.9 percent), eleven separated, (16.4 percent) and four widowed (6 percent). Seven persons had married and given birth to children in Japan. Most of the married respondents had one or two children left behind in Thailand.

Only eleven persons (16.4 percent) had graduated from vocational school and six persons (9.0 percent) had a bachelor degree. Most had only primary schooling (twenty-five persons, 37.3 percent) or secondary schooling (twenty-three persons, 34.4 percent).

Before entering Japan, most had worked as daily wage workers such as carpenters, maintenance workers, clerks, retailers, factory workers, domestic workers, and teachers. Some had their own businesses such as setting up agricultural irrigation, a book store, a motorcycle repair shop, an air conditioning repair shop, and a general store selling vegetables, food, and cloth. There were only a
few who worked in agriculture. Three were still studying in junior high school (15 years of age), high school (19 years), and vocational school (21 years). Five respondents had just come back from working abroad in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Saudi Arabia.

About one-third of the respondents (twenty-one persons) had worked abroad previously. The main destination countries were Saudi Arabia (five persons), Hong Kong (five), Korea (five), Taiwan (three), and Singapore (three). Others had worked in Brunei, Israel, Iraq, and the United States. Five had come to work in Japan before including one who had entered Japan illegally four times since 1992.

Channels of entry to Japan

The brokerage system was the major channel that respondents used to enter Japan. About 35.8 percent of respondents paid a fee in advance to brokers in Thailand before departing for Japan. Some respondents (25.4 percent) arranged their own trip to Japan by using a tourist visa or trainee visa, and then overstayed illegally. Unfortunately, some respondents (23.9 percent) were prey to female traffickers. After entering Japan, they were forced into sex work with a "debt" that they had to work off to their employer or mama-san (owner of a Japanese bar). Some respondents had been legally working in Japan with a working visa or training visa, such as domestic workers, chefs (10.4 percent), and apprentices (4.5 percent).

The channels of entry to Japan were different for each group. For the first group using illegal brokers in Thailand, the Thai job seekers needed to pay the fee in Thai baht before leaving for Japan. The brokers arranged the whole trip for them, including processing documentation, and travel route planning, while the job placement arrangements were made by brokers who came to recruit the job seekers in the village or brokers who work with agencies in Bangkok. Normally, the Thai job seekers who used the brokerage system were males and a few females not destined for work as sex workers in Japan. This group has mostly entered Japan since 1991. For fourteen people, around one-third of this group, who entered Japan between 1989 and 1991, the fee was much cheaper than for those who were trafficked to Japan and who were required to pay
illegal brokers between 100,000 and 400,000 baht for the processing fee. In 1992, the brokerage fee had risen above 200,000 baht, and reached a peak of 400,000 baht in 1997.

For those women who both voluntarily and involuntarily plan to work as sex workers in Japan, female trafficking has boomed from 1991 until the present. They connect with international human trafficking networks which arrange for them to migrate and find employment. In 1991, Thai sex workers paid an average of 2.3 million yen (around 805,000 baht or US$ 20,125) to trafficking organizations. But since 2002, the figure has increased to 5 million yen (around 1,750,000 baht or US $43,750) and may be much higher. Most of the women can work off this debt in one to one and a half years.

Documented workers, such as trainees and domestic helpers, are in the best position because they do not need to pay excessive fees to illegal brokers.

*Life in Japan*

Almost half of respondents (thirty-two persons, 48.4 percent) stayed for many years, particularly respondents who entered since 1992. There were five respondents (7.5 percent) who entered Japan when they were younger than 20 years old. Two of them came to Japan as sex workers. Now, both have been arrested and detained for deportation by Japanese Immigration. One had just arrived in Japan for two months and still owed a debt of five million yen to the *mama-san*. The other entered Japan at the age of 17 years old and was arrested when she was 19 years old. She had paid the entire debt of five million yen to the *mama-san*.

The youngest male interviewee entered Japan in 1992 when he was 15 years old and had just graduated from junior high school. Two more males came to Japan when they were 17 and 19 years old, in 1990 and 1991 respectively. Three of them were between 30 and 33 years old. Two of them were married with two children each. The majority of the male immigrants entered Japan when they were between 30 and 39 years old (twenty-six persons, 38.8 percent) and between 20 and 29 years old (twenty-two persons, 32.8 percent). Some entered Japan when they were 51–52 years old and are now between 53 and 58 years old. More males than females
stayed for a longer period, especially those who entered Japan between 1991 and 1992. Possibly this is because some females were married to Japanese men and changed their illegal status to that of a permanent resident visa. This survey focused only on Thai migrant workers and did not cover those who are spouses of Japanese citizens.

Fifty-eight respondents (86.6 percent) were working illegally. Of these, thirty-three were male and twenty-five female. Only two men and seven women were working legally with employment contracts. For those who are in Japan illegally, their jobs are insecure and they have changed jobs frequently because of strict immigration law enforcement. In 2004, Japan amended its immigration law, increasing the fine on Japanese employers who illicitly hire foreign workers. Thus, the demand for illegal migrant workers by Japanese employers was reduced. Moreover, the economic slump in Japan also decreased the demand for foreign migrant workers. Many therefore needed to work at more than one job in order to survive. Most of the male respondents (23.9 percent) worked as daily wage workers. Some male respondents (16.4 percent) worked as semi-skilled workers and some were self-employed with some extra-time jobs, for instance, selling food and snacks, and planting vegetables on rented land for commercial purposes.

Eleven of the females worked in commercial sex work, snack bars, and karaoke bars. The majority of illegal immigrants started as sex workers and then changed to other daily wage work after discharging their debts. However, they earn less money than male immigrant workers. The males worked at road construction, plumbing, horticultural work on farms or golf courses, hog farms, fruit farms, maintenance, carpentry, construction work, food factories (fried dumplings), fish sauce factories, squid factories, and plastic factories. The daily wage jobs that Thai female workers performed were waitressing, cleaning floors inside hot spring baths (onsen), cleaning construction sites, cleaning ramen shops, and binding vegetable packs. In general, the males can earn around 10,000 to 12,000 yen per day (US$95–115 or 3,900–4,700 baht), while the females can earn only 8,000 yen per day (US$76 or 3,125 baht).
Normally, the semi-skilled jobs that require knowledge of electronic devices, computers, and advanced skills go to male migrant workers such as welders, lathers, anti-rust sprayers, carpenters, fish and pork factory workers, and chefs in Thai, Korean, and Japanese restaurants. These semi-skilled workers can earn at least 300,000 yen per month (US$2,900 or 117,000 baht). Some respondents were self-employed as owners of a restaurant, video rental shop, computer graphic shop, or other small business.

Nineteen females had been working as commercial sex workers (CSWs) since first arriving in Japan. Eleven of them were still working as CSWs. Unfortunately, on the interview date, some were arrested by the police; some of these escaped to ask for assistance from the Thai Embassy in Tokyo. As a result, these eleven women are being deported to Thailand. The other eight had already paid off their debts and shifted work. Two remained working in snack bars as waitresses, and one opened a massage parlor with hidden sex services. Five of them worked as daily wage workers with less income than as CSWs but more peace of mind. Two out of the five had married, with a three year old child and a five year old child, respectively. They had to take care of the children and thus had less time to work outside of the home.

Legal work and income

Those who work legally under employment contracts such as domestic worker can earn at least 150,000 to 250,000 yen per month (US$1,400–2,400 or 60,000–97,000 baht). Some who also work at spare-time jobs can earn more. Normally, the contractual domestic workers live in their employers’ house with free food, accommodation, and one day off per week. There are also some other contractual workers such as chefs and trainees. These contractual groups receive salaries and welfare benefits. Trainees receive a lower salary and fewer benefits. Most worked as factory workers at jobs that required vocational school or college graduation and an age between 20 and 25 years old. The trainee contracts are for three years. After deducting the accommodation, water, and electricity costs, the trainees can earn only 135,000 yen per month (US$1,300 or 53,000 baht). As a result, they need to work overtime in order to add another 40,000 to 50,000 yen.
Skills from abroad

The experience that Thai migrant workers can gain in Japan, especially those who are semi-skilled laborers, both legal and illegal, are as follows: welding metal, steel work using computers and robots, woodcraft, furniture making, machine repair, car gadget repair, domestic work such as cooking, party setting, house cleaning, child care, Japanese, Korean and Thai food cooking in restaurants, new agricultural techniques for fruit farms and large animal farms, and Japanese language skills.

Financial management

Around one fifth of respondents (fourteen persons, 20.9 percent) are in debt, including eleven females and three males. The women who worked as CSWs were more likely to be indebted. Five CSWs were still indebted to their mama-san. Some who had been arrested and deported before paying off their debt were subsequently pursued by trafficking crime networks back in Thailand. Some have debts incurred in Thailand from house building or failed investments. Some owed large amounts of money in Japan for medical care because they had no health insurance due to their illegal working status. For example, one respondent owed a hospital 900,000 yen (US$ 8,500 or 350,000 baht) for a stomach operation, and had to repay 50,000 yen a month. Another had to pay 2,300,000 yen (US$ 22,000 or 900,000 baht) for hospital treatment of a child’s thalassemia. Fortunately, the employer agreed to pay the hospital first and deduct the money in monthly installments over two years.

Remittance

Only four sent home no remittance. All were women who were trafficked as CSWs in Japan. Three of them decided to escape from the snack bar three days after arrival Japan because they were being forced to provide sex services. The other woman escaped a month after she arrived in Japan. As a result, these women have no savings and cannot send remittances to their family in Thailand yet.

The rest sent remittances to Thailand to cover high family living costs, children’s educational costs, family debts, paying their parents for child care, paying for their parents’ living costs, and
saving for their return. The male migrant workers trusted their parents more than their spouses because some spouses had run off with their remittances. Some women used the money for gambling or gave it to their new husbands.

**Savings and investment**

There were forty-eight respondents, thirty-one men and seventeen women, who were saving money for their return to Thailand. Males were better able to save money than females, mainly due to their higher income, though some men gambled, drank, saved little, and sent little or no remittances to their family.

Twenty-two had a bank account in Japan, and five in Thailand. The five reported savings of 500,000 to 5,000,000 baht but these figures should be treated with caution.

Twenty-seven sent money to invest in some businesses or assets in Thailand, especially for buying agricultural land, cars, and houses but also for building apartments for rent, opening a motorcycle repair shop, grocery, internet shop, or buying a cow.

Although most respondents (63 persons, 94 percent) had money saved, they still would like to earn and save more. Only four respondents said that they were ready to return to Thailand. The main reasons for not being ready was concern over their occupation and earnings after return to Thailand.

**Returning to Thailand**

**When and where**

The majority of respondents (40 persons, 59.7 percent) had already made plans to return to Thailand. Five planned to return within a year, another eleven within two years, and total of thirty within three years. Many had been in Japan for around fourteen years without returning to visit their families. They felt that they had enough savings and longed for reunification with their families. Some were ready to return were they arrested by police, though preferred to stay and earn a little longer.

Twenty-three people (34.3 percent) had not yet decided when to return, mainly because they had not yet saved enough. Several had thought about marrying a Japanese to evade the stricter enforcement of immigration law.
Over half (52 persons, 77.6 percent) wanted to return to stay with their families in their hometowns in Thailand. Among the others, only eight (11.9 percent) wanted to go to Bangkok, while seven (10.4 percent) had not yet decided where they would stay on return.

What they would like to do

Most expected to run their own small enterprise after returning. Several others wanted to work in agriculture, and only a few hoped for factory work.

Most of the sample had come from non-agricultural work, and in Japan had been self-employed, or worked in factories, or worked in daily wage jobs, and returned from working abroad in other destination countries. Forty persons, especially in the 40–49 age range, planned to open their own small enterprise. Twenty-three persons, mainly in the 50–59 age range, intended to work in agriculture in order to be close to nature. Some had already bought land for farming. Only eight, mainly younger respondents who had worked in industry before migrating, intended to seek factory work on return.

Others had no clear plans for return. They did not know what kind of business would yield the best return because they had not been in Thailand for a very long time.

The range of jobs that respondents would like to do after return included running a motorcycle repair shop, a second-hand gadget shop, an air conditioning and refrigeration repair shop, an agricultural machinery shop, a plant nursery, a restaurant, a coffee shop, a laundry shop, a domestic cleaning service, and renting out apartments. More than half of respondents had no idea of their income target because they had been away a long time and could not estimate living expenses.

Needs of returnees

The migrant workers, especially women who had been trafficked as CSWs, felt that they needed some authority or organization to facilitate the process of returning to Thailand. They needed a health check because they had lived for several years in Japan without health insurance and avoided going to hospitals
because of the high cost. All migrants, legal and illegal, needed advice on prospective jobs after their return, especially on agriculture, business entrepreneurship, marketing, and sources of finance. Some hoped to adapt their experience from abroad to new jobs in Thailand.

Most respondents (57 persons) are interested in participating in a returned migrants group if the Thai government or another organization would established one. The activities that they expect from a returned migrants group are: career consulting, health consulting, legal assistance, savings groups as a source of funding, and health insurance for members.

Some respondents said that “the decision to return to Thailand is harder and more worrisome than the decision to come to work in Japan.”

Return and reintegration program

Categories of returning workers

Foreseeable return: documented workers who would return when they finished their contracts; some undocumented workers who will surrender to immigration authorities, such as trafficking victims who escaped from their employers; those who will surrender to immigration because of health problems or accidents at their jobs; those who have stayed a long time and reached their savings target; those who wish to surrender to take their children born in Japan back to Thailand for education.

Unforeseeable return: the majority of undocumented workers who want to work in Japan for as long as they can. Among the migrants arrested by Immigration, one had stayed for fourteen years, while some CSWs had stayed for only one month.

Recommended programs for returned migrants

Economic reintegration. For the most part, businesses set up by returned migrants were not stable or had failed early on. Their earnings were only sufficient for daily expenses, not saving. Some did not invest in any business or income-generating project.

The program should help returnees to become economically self-reliant and empowered, and contribute to the development
efforts of the country through the wise investment of their savings. Project feasibility and investment planning consulting should be provided. Career development could cover any of the following: returnees, spouses of returnees, parents or children of returnees, brothers or sisters of unmarried returnees and nephews or nieces of married returnees without children. Returned migrants and their families should be encouraged to save and invest their earnings. Other members of the community will also benefit from the enterprise investments of returnees.

Examples of vocational reintegration programs are as follows: training in various vocational and technical skills to facilitate the beneficiary’s employment or entrepreneurship efforts; project feasibility and investment planning consulting; a job center to develop opportunities and mechanisms for local employment and job placements; savings and livelihood programs to encourage returned members and family members to save and to provide loans to start a small business; and returned family cooperatives to access loans from local banks in order to set up a business.

Social reintegration. Psycho-social reintegration which prepares returnees to enter and integrate with Thai society includes such things as psycho-social services, emergency repatriation, temporary shelter, referrals, stress relief, and medical and legal consultations. The reintegration services should be accessible along with pre-departure and on-site services. The program should provide for returned female migrants, particularly those who were victims of abuse and exploitation. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare or some of its departments should lead in developing a strategic integrated program of interventions that matches the needs of returning migrants in terms of psycho-social and personal reintegration, education and training, political and legal empowerment, health services, and economic self-reliance. They should further encourage and support NGOs as implementers of reintegration programs for returned migrants and establish a system for NGO implementing partners.

Example of social reintegration programs are as follows: an information center for returned Thai migrants could be established at the international airport where returnees can pick up information regarding their options; Japanese books, cassettes, videos or VCDs
should be provided for the new returnees, particularly Thai children who were born in Japan and cannot speak Thai; a Returned Female Network should be set up to assist female migrants in seeking alternative livelihoods as they reintegrate into Thai society, including immediate assistance, education, and training, and to encourage them to remain in their communities rather than migrating to urban centers or abroad; promotion of international cooperation among related agencies working with returned Thai migrants from Japan, including the Thai and Japanese governments, Thai and Japanese NGOs, and returned migrant workers; health promotion for Thai migrant workers returning from abroad, particularly health checkups upon their return; temporary shelters, particularly for those women who were trafficked, or were pursued by trafficking networks and are afraid to return to stay at home, as well as for returned migrants who face problems with their relatives or have no accommodation; counseling, orientation, education and training for new returnees; and legal assistance, particularly for returnees with experiences of abuse and exploitation or those who were in accidents on the job.

Conclusion

International migration is currently a dynamic and complicated phenomenon. The poor and the vulnerable from an underdeveloped country migrate to work in a comparatively rich country. They all search for a better life and better economic opportunities, although they may need to sacrifice their own human dignity, work in jobs that local people refuse to do, or work in jobs that they have never done before in their life. In addition, unfortunately, they have to use the services of exploitative job recruitment brokers. These brokers look for people in the villages or in Bangkok using several beguiling and exploitative tricks. International migration has tremendously changed the norms and traditions of people in backward communities.

The people who really benefit from international migration are not migrant workers but the brokers who possess wide connection networks, both local and international. The migrant workers and their families risk losing out in both the short and long run.

From a macro perspective, Thai immigrant workers to Japan
are able to send large amounts of remittance to their home country. But from a micro perspective, migrant workers and their families require a great deal of money for the departure process. In addition, some migrant workers need to work in risky and socially unacceptable jobs like commercial sex work. They strive for survival and surrender to exploitative and risky situations, especially in terms of their health.

Economic gain is the primary factor in Thai migrants’ decisions to work in Japan. Although they earned less money than the local workers in Japan, their wages could improve their standard of living in Thailand. Working in Japan for only three to five days gives them the same amount of money as working in Thailand for a whole month. Although living costs in Japan are very expensive, they can still save amounts which are significant in the Thai context.

Due to stressful working conditions, they need to find ways of relaxing. If they chose the right kinds of recreation, they might be successful from having come to work in Japan. However, if they chose the wrong kinds of recreation, such as gambling, pachinko (Japanese pinball), snack bars, or drinking, they might forfeit the benefit of working in Japan. Self-control and planning are important in the long-run migration process.

Migration puts families at risk. Those who go to work in Japan illegally may have no chance to teach and socialize with their children. They may be able to send back money, but not their human selves, and this can result in children learning extravagant and dangerous habits such as drug abuse. Families can also break apart from long estrangement or from misuse of remittances.

Living abroad for several years can also lead to difficulties in reintegrating to the original society. Therefore, reintegration programs should help those returning to reassume their role in nation building. Such a program should include socio-cultural and economic reintegration for the migrant workers and their families who were left behind. The special objectives of reintegration programs are to reunite the migrant workers with their families and communities, and to adapt their experiences abroad for developing their original community and country.
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Appendix: Ten case studies

Case study 1

Victim of human trafficking, twelve years in Japan. Could not go anywhere by herself. Surrendered herself in order to come back to get document to marry Japanese husband.

Ibaraki Prefecture, female, 46 years. Buriram province origin. Twelve years in Japan since 1993 while she was 34. Before going to Japan she worked at a canned-fish factory. She was deceived owing to her naivety and thought that she was going to work in a canned-fish factory in Singapore. Before leaving she was arranged to stay with others by the handler and then took the bus to Hat Yai district, Songkhla province. She sensed the abnormality and asked to return but was not allowed and was confined until the departure. Her six companions knew that they would go to work at snack bars in Japan. She entered Japan on someone else’s passport provided by the broker. It was called a “proxy pass.” Arriving in Japan, she was shocked and stunned when was told that she was indebted and had to work to pay back 3.75 million yen (around 1.3 million baht). The first month she was not forced to work as a prostitute because a Japanese man (56 years old) bought her from the mama-san. She lived with him for ten years after which he was going to sell her. Her present husband then took her off to Mito. She did all kinds of odd jobs to earn her living, like dish-washing at a ramen restaurant, construction works, road sweeping, and weeding. She said that she gained less income than as a prostitute but had more pride. After two years, her husband wanted to legalize the marriage but found that she had no domicile registration in Thailand. Her mother had divorced her father before she was born and she was raised by her grandmother who never registered her. She finished only primary education. After twelve years in Japan she had no saving, never traveled on her own, could not go anywhere except accompanied by her Japanese husband. After she surrendered she dared not fly back to Thailand alone. Her husband had to come with her. After retirement her husband would like to come to stay in Buriram province but she does not know what to do yet.
Case study 2

From three years as a factory worker in Taiwan to sex worker in Japan.

Nagano Prefecture, female, 35 years. Chiang Rai province origin. More than three years in Japan from 2001 when she was 31. She had been working for three years in a weaving factory in Taiwan before going to Japan. She was indebted 2.5 million yen (around 875,000 baht) which she worked to pay off within one year. After that she worked to save money. But after two years she was arrested by the police. On the day of interview she stayed at a shelter waiting to be deported. She said after paying all the debt she still worked as before but the allocation of income changed. She would get 30,000 yen (around 10,500 baht) from each client, had to give 8,000 yen to the *mama-san*, and cleared 22,000 yen (around 7,000 baht) for herself. After paying the debt she had fewer clients because the *mama-san* would not favor her anymore while her expenses for lodging, clothes, and cosmetics increased. Before being arrested she saved some money but not much (undisclosed). After being sent back, she will go to live with her family in Chiang Rai for a while before thinking what to do next.

Case study 3

Victim of human trafficking, only one year in Japan and was arrested, waiting to be deported.

Saitama Prefecture, female, 23 years. Chiang Rai province origin. Stayed in Japan for one year and three months. She arrived in Japan in early 2004 after finishing her diploma in accounting. Her family was poor and owed more than a hundred thousand baht to the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives. She did not want her parents and elder brother to work hard so she decided to work in Japan. She passed the immigration check by going with someone. The plane reached Narita Airport around midnight. The person led her to tell the Immigration official that she went with him and was allowed to pass. She knew what she would do in Japan, the family also knew and understood but she did not know that she had to pay off 5.5 million yen or 2 million baht of debt. She worked at a snack bar for more than one year and was arrested by the immigration police. When she was arrested she still had
around 600,000 baht of debt left. She had no savings and never sent money back home. She said that if she had not been arrested, she would have cleared the debt after working one more year and would then have sent money home. Due to the arrest, she hopes to escape the debt, but knows others who were forced to return to Japan to work off outstanding debt. She stayed at a shelter for victims of human trafficking after being arrested. She worried about her health and will have a check-up back home. She still had no idea what to do on return.

Case study 4

Victim of human trafficking, came to work in Japan for her children.

Yamanashi Prefecture, female, 40 years. Chiang Mai province origin. Has been working in Japan for fourteen years since 1991 when she was 26 years old. She had just divorced then and had two children to bring up, the younger just 2 years old. She decided to come to Japan in hope of making money to educate her children. She was a victim of human trafficking and came to work in sexual services with a debt of 4.5 million yen (1,575,000 baht). After clearing the debt she did various kinds of work as laborer, waitress in a snack bar without selling sex (worked from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.). During the day she rented land to make a vegetable garden. She likes agriculture. Her neighbors said that she is kind and likes to cook for visitors. She sent money back home to buy land and build two houses, one for each child. She would like to return to Thailand but does not know when. She would do agriculture in Chiang Mai. During her fourteen years in Japan, many relatives died but she could not come back to attend the cremation. Out of missing her family she built a shelf to display the pictures of those relatives who passed away.

Case study 5

Victim of human trafficking who had health problem but dared not go to check in Japan and wanted to go back to check in Thailand.

Saitama Prefecture, female, 41 years. Bangkok origin (Saimai district). Had been in Japan for sixteen years since 1989. She went
to Japan through an agency via a foreign country (she did not know what country). She pretended to go to Singapore with a visa but had to transit in Japan and escaped from the airport. She worked to pay the debt of 3.6 million yen (around 1.2 million baht). Someone paid the *mama-san* for her freedom. She worked as a waitress in Thai restaurants and snack bars but did not sell sex. In public she was joyful and good humored, she laughed loud, kind hearted, had service mind, but she had chronic health problems, vomiting and excreting blood. She never went to see a doctor, just bought medicine to treat herself. She dared not go to see a doctor in Japan as she did not want to disclose her illness, but intended to go back to check in Thailand. Now she had no debt but no saving because she used to send money to her parents who spent it all. So now she asked her aunt to take care of her remittance in her own account. She would work for another eight months and then surrender and return to Thailand in early 2006. She sent 70,000 baht back to Thailand each time and expected to send another 500,000 baht before returning home. She had a Thai husband in Japan, and he was diligent and could save money. He planned to go back to do a small business selling auto parts. She wanted to go back to live a normal life. She followed changes in Thailand by renting Thai dramas on VCD to view at home.

*Case study 6*

Family that decided to surrender in order to bring a child ill with thalassemia for treatment in Thailand

Kanagawa Prefecture, father of 33 years, Udon Thani province origin. Had been in Japan for fourteen years since 1991 after finishing secondary school. His work in Japan was semi-skilled welder with computer design. He learnt the skill from practice. Income was rather good. Mother of 31 years, Chiang Rai province origin. Had been in Japan for thirteen years since 1992 when she was 18 years old. She entered Japan through a human trafficker and had to sell sex to pay off 2.5 million yen (875,000 baht). After clearing the debt she worked as a waitress and in a plastics factory. After having children she worked at home for low pay of 40,000 to 60,000 yen per month in order to take care of the children, now 3 and 6 years old. The younger child became sick with thalassemia
and had to be admitted to hospital. Luckily, the employer advanced 2.3 million yen (around 800,000 baht). They decided the mother should surrender to the authorities in order to take both children back to Thailand while the father worked another two years to repay the employer and save money for the child’s treatment.

Case study 7

Eleven years in Japan, stay in one town, never traveled to anywhere else. Had health problem.

Yamanashi Prefecture, male, 41 years. Khon Kaen province origin. Had been in Japan for eleven years since 1994 when he was 30. Before going to Japan he had been working for seven years in Bangkok (Silom) as a gemstone cutter. He paid 120,000 baht to a broker to arrange a tourist visa for Japan. Mostly worked on construction as mason, carpenter, or dam construction. Employer was cruel and beat workers that failed to understand Japanese. Took two years to learn Japanese. Had gastric problem and had to be admitted for an operation that cost 900,000 yen (around 310,000 baht), payable by installments over eighteen months. He intended to work until clearing the debt and saving some money then would surrender and go back home. He had already sent money for his wife to buy two plots of land. After returning home he intended to do agriculture, fish culture, chicken raising. He did not like to travel. For eleven years he stayed only at Yamanashi, never went to Tokyo, never took the subway.

Case study 8

Was in the first group that went to work in Japan. Had been there for fourteen years, would work for another year and then surrender to go back home with friends.

Saitama Prefecture, male, 53 years. Chaiyaphum province origin. Had been in Japan for fourteen years. Went there at 37 in 1991. He paid 170,000 baht for the arrangement of a tourist visa. He still had his passport that he renewed continuously. Before going to Japan he had worked six years in Saudi Arabia, building the navy dock, laying air-conditioning pipes, for 10,000 baht per month. In Japan worked on road construction and cutting metal by computer. Work in Japan was harder but more lucrative. He rented
Thai migrants in Japan: Experience and return

a house with two other Thais who came at the same period but from the north and Bangkok. Many others who came at the same time had been arrested and deported one by one. It was hard to stay now because the immigration police were more strict. He aimed to stay one further year then surrender. He refused an offer to return and start a business because he wanted to save more. But soon after he and his two friends were arrested. He had sent money to his wife who had accumulated savings of 2.3 million baht, and bought four breeding cows for 160,000 baht. He intended to live with his family in Chaiyaphum and do agriculture. The three had learnt little Japanese language and culture because they stayed together, talked in Thai, cooked Thai food everyday, and rented Thai dramas on VCD from Thai shop.

Case study 9

Went to Japan to make money but the family broke up.

Gunma Prefecture, male, 49 years. Phetchabun province origin. Had been in Japan for fourteen years since 1991. He arrived in Japan with a tourist visa acquired from a broker for 200,000 baht. He worked on construction, welder, pig raiser. He sent money home to wife for eight years, and later learnt she had a new man who had lost it on gambling. After that he sent money to his two children who had now completed higher education. He had neither debt nor saving. In Japan he found a partner from Trat province. They had saved to buy a plot of land and intended to build a house. Once he had 230,000 baht saved, he would like to surrender and go back to live with her in Trat but she said that after returning to Thailand they should separate. He compared his life in Japan to those of the Burmese in Thailand. He earned 130,000 to 140,000 yen a month (around 45,000 to 50,000 baht) but in some months saved only 2,000 baht. Before Japan, he owned a pickup truck, and brought vegetables from Lomsak market to sell in Pathumthani. If he had not been ambitious to earn money in Japan, his family would not have broken apart.

Case study 10:

Twenty-six years on the road of labor abroad (twelve years in Saudi Arabia and fourteen years in Japan).
Gunma Prefecture, male, 60 years. Udon Thani province origin. Had been in Japan for fourteen years since 1991. He entered Japan himself by tourist visa without paying an agent. Before going to Japan he had just come back from working in Saudi Arabia. He decide to go to work in Japan because the land, house, and car bought from twelve years of working in Saudi Arabia were taken away by his wife who abandoned their two children. He needed to earn for their education. The younger was studying in the second year at university. After the children finished their education he would save some more money then return home. In Japan he worked as a painter, cleaner, and interior decorator. For the past eleven years he had worked in a fish factory making dumplings, and was trusted by the employer. This factory had welfare for workers including health checks, and took them sightseeing once a year. He said that the workers hardly speak Japanese as they have no time to talk at work and the Thai workers rent houses to stay together. He intended to return within two years but had no idea what he would do. He had some land but was uncertain if it had enough water supply for agriculture.