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The Case of Thai Migrant Workers**

Sudarat Musikawong
Mahidol University

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國立交通大學文化研究國際中心

International Center for Cultural Studies

National Chiao Tung University

Rm.103 HA Building 2, 1001 University Road

Hsinchu, Taiwan

Tel: +886-3-5712121 Ext.58274, 58272

Fax: +886-3-5734450

Website: https://iccs.nctu.edu.tw/en/wps_list.php

Email: iccs.wps@gmail.com

The Global Compact for Migration under Covid-19?: The Case of Thai Migrant Workers¹

Sudarat Musikawong

Mahidol University

My essay focuses on comparing Indonesian, Filipino, and Thai migrant workers in Taiwan regarding what is now being commonly called “brokerage infrastructures.” However, I want to provide an outsider point of view, particularly from Thailand, and begin by placing the question of international labor brokerage in historical global referencing to prior labor import regimes. Especially given that the Covid-19 situation ultimately makes more visible the fault-lines of inequality, one should pay attention to the most vulnerable groups within one’s territory, regardless if we are referencing Asia or the North American contexts. Covid-19 makes apparent host countries’ dependencies on non-citizen migrant workers who have no political voice, no economic bargaining power, and are ultimately forgotten after their contract terms.

Stepping away from our contexts in Asia, we can see how the regularization of temporary foreign labor migration was used in economic development since the 1940s. In the US, after the exclusion of Chinese and Japanese labor migration at the turn of the century, other nationalities were used. From 1942 to the mid-1960s, the US government used the Bracero Program to import temporary Mexican workers to sustain agriculture, poultry and meat-packing, fisheries, infrastructure construction, and factories. And while the government “turns a blind eye” to the exploitation of Mexican farm-workers under the table, you can see the labor contractor behind the employer.² The mechanisms for bilateralism of import and exporting

¹ This essay is based on a joint research project with Co-PIs Shu-fen Lin, Li-fang Liang, Kenzi Chen, and Malee Sunpuwan. Special thanks to the Taiwan Fellowship, ICCS- National Chiao Tung University, and IPSR-Mahidol University for supporting the project.

² Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

low-wage workers were in place. 4.5 million work contracts and many more workers had crossed the US-Mexico border many times over when the Bracero Program ended in 1964.

The MOUs between states, be it Thailand, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, are not that different in prioritizing work sector quotas based on unmet labor demand. While the Philippines has been able to maintain that domestic and home care workers and seafaring workers do not get charged a placement fee to off-set their lower wages, the three other countries do not negotiate for the same kind of bilateral structural changes in regulation and practices. Hence the enforcement for no placement fee for these two sectors is not universally pursued by labor attaches and the Taiwan labor inspectors. Thailand, in particular, discourages their citizens from taking jobs that are less than the Thai minimum wage, about 10USD per day. However, according to one labor attaché— “When we inspected the dormitory and found safety or the lack of an air conditioner and advocated for the workers, the employer said— ‘I will just hire Indonesians.’ We lost over a thousand positions that year.”

International labor migration in modern history has become increasingly regulated. UN global governance of labor migration has been much more recent. There have been benchmarks like the UN Population and Development Conference in Cairo in 1994, the establishment of the Global Commission in 2003 by Kofi Anan, the 2006 UN High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, and of late, the 2018 adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration to establish governance for temporary migration in terms of economic development, to regularize and control migration flows, while creating a minimum level of social protections adhering to the baseline level of anti-trafficking, labor, and human rights. These UN efforts are essentially some aspects of creating infrastructure to maintain the global labor sourcing market.

Let us consider the point of view of a group of workers who help build some of Taiwan’s important infrastructures- MRT, harbors, and mass transit highways... Thai workers and the Thailand economic situation. Recently, the National Statistics Office in Thailand estimated that unemployment in the country has doubled to 5,411,407 people (8% of the population), with

many applying for Covid relief and social security. This number is greatly underestimated because the definition of unemployment is working less than 4 hours per day. Yet 8% nevertheless, demonstrates the gravity of the situation in which Thai workers are unemployed with little access to opportunities abroad.³ According to the Ministry of Labor, Thailand typically sends over 100,000 workers abroad annually with over 100 million Baht in remittances.⁴ In the past, seeking work abroad had assisted working-class households in increasing incomes when faced with underemployment. Since the Covid-19 situation, only Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan continue to allow for a significant number of new migrant workers. Sending workers abroad to Taiwan, South Korea, Israel, and Japan to supplement underemployment cannot continue to function as a sustainable stop-gap measure. Thailand's slowing of minimum wages, youth unemployment, low salaries for the newly graduated from lower-ranking universities, and rampant underemployment in the rural provinces need a new political-economic plan for job creation and different strategies for growing a new middle class.

In September 2020, only 2,344 Thai workers were traveling to work abroad, with 1,023 to Taiwan, 735 to Japan, 214 to Israel, and 132 to Bangladesh, while the highest most consistent re-entry workers are going to countries like the UAE 34 and Israel 33.⁵ It was not until this month that South Korea's EPS has re-opened their active recruitment for 2,691 Thai workers for agriculture, livestock, and construction.⁶ In August 2020, the Thai Ministry of Labor reported that 121,922 Thai workers remained abroad, with most workers in Asia and the Middle East and a goal of sending close to 52,000 workers abroad.⁷ While lowered numbers of Thai migrant workers abroad leads to fewer opportunities for buffering the economic impact for low-income households, there still are a number of aspects that necessitate a careful approach under Covid-19.

³ https://www.bot.or.th/Thai/ResearchAndPublications/articles/Pages/Article_12Oct2020.aspx

⁴ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1994311/thai-workers-leave-for-jobs-in-israel>

⁵ <https://www.doe.go.th/prd/overseas/statistic/param/site/149/cat/81/sub/0/pull/category/view/list-label>
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1994311/thai-workers-leave-for-jobs-in-israel>

⁶ <https://doe.go.th/prd/> See also October 2020 announcement:
https://www.doe.go.th/prd/main/news/param/site/1/cat/7/sub/0/pull/detail/view/detail/object_id/40019

⁷ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1969259/50-000-thai-workers-to-head-overseas>

Indeed for official Thai workers abroad (not counting undocumented workers), Taiwan warrants special focused attention. As an aging society, since the 1980s, Taiwan (like Thailand in the 2000s) has had an increasing demand for workers to fill the 3D sectors (dirty, dangerous, degrading jobs). But by the 2000s, Taiwan had particular demands in the sectors of home-care work, fisheries, construction, agriculture, and manufacturing industries. From the 1990s to the present, scholars focused on how Thai workers consistently experience over-charging by private recruitment fees, wage theft, exploitative working conditions and hours with unpaid overtime pay, health deterioration, and the inability to negotiate due to legal status, language, and sector restrictions (Chantavanich et al., 1999; Laodumrongchai, 1998; Tsay, 2002; Ayuwat, 2015). This is still the case, but less so. In our interviews with Thai workers, we found that only workers who wanted to be placed with particular factories guaranteeing significant overtime or workers who faced a criminal record and needed doctored documents were overcharged.⁸ Wages for working in Taiwan without overtime are not significantly different from working in Thailand. Furthermore, in the sectors that have traditionally hired Thai workers, like mass construction and factory sectors, rates of new employment have slowed, while Taiwan continues to show a growing demand in home care, fisheries, and agriculture sectors. These are sectors exempt from the Labor Standards Act and are not preferred by Thai workers. As of the end of February 2020, Taiwan's Ministry of Labor reported 719,487 migrant workers, with 63% in productive industries and 37% in “social welfare sectors.” By September 2020, there was a three percent decrease with a total of 699,218 workers with a 3% job losses across sectors except for construction due to Covid-19. Furthermore, where once Thai workers dominated the mass construction and manufacturing sectors from the 1990s to mid-2000s, now Indonesian workers constitute 38%, Vietnamese 32%, Filipinos 22%, and Thais only 8%. Now manufacturing represents 61% of the migrant workers, domestic and care workers are 36%, agriculture 2%, and construction representing 1% of the migrant worker jobs. While working in Israel and South Korea compensate workers with higher wages, working in Israel's agricultural sector near Gaza place workers at physical risk in conflict zones. Yet questions remain about what migrant worker Covid-19 safety measures are in place and what are the responsibilities of both sending countries and receiving destinations. Workers bound for abroad are vigorously tested for their health status, abide by state quarantine measures, and are subjected to varying conditions of working abroad during the Covid-19 economic downturn.

⁸ Forthcoming Report, IPSR Mahidol University, and ICCS National Chiao Tung University, 2021.

In some of the worse cases, migrant workers are often subjected to high Covid-19 risks, including overcrowded living quarters, various workplace abuses including limited health access, wage theft leading to further vulnerabilities, employer denial of responsibilities when workers become injured, sick, or dying. All receiving countries for Thai workers are yet to grant Covid-19 monetary relief to migrant workers, despite their legal residency status. Under the Covid-19 situation, levels of abuse, disregard, and exploitation make clear that citizenship or lack thereof facilitates rent extractions exacerbating migrant worker precarity. Thai migrant workers returning to Thailand are often either ill-informed or disqualified from seeking Covid-19 relief due to exclusive measures. Under these desperate times, it is yet to see how any Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration might be pursued.

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