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## LABOR MIGRATION FLOWS FROM VIETNAM TO THAILAND IN THE CONTEXT OF ASEAN REGIONAL INTEGRATION

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**Abstract.** International migration has been always an important and compound issue by virtue of it closely relates to various facets from political, social and economic development for regions and countries. In ASEAN, international migration has been always defined as one of the fundamental features in ASEAN's development transition (Chantavanich, Ito, and Middleton 2013). Over the last decades, the region's economies have achieved significant and impressive growth, becoming one of the most dynamic economic performance regions in the world as well as has become more widely integrated into the regional and global economics<sup>1</sup>. The rapid growth process has transformed fundamentally economic structure of many Southeast Asian countries with the greater contribution of industrial and service sectors instead of solely based on the agriculture sector over many centuries. The demand for skills in higher income countries in the region has grown, while there is a fall in birthrates with greying populations that causes an increasing shortage of labor such as Thailand. For the lower income ones, on the contrary, the youth populations are burgeoning, which lead to the unemployment and underemployment rate are dramatically increasing such as Vietnam and Philippines.

**Key words:** labor migration, Vietnam, Thailand, ASEAN, regional integration

### Introduction

Cooperation in ASEAN has embarked on a deeper regional economic integration through the formal establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) on December 31, 2015. It is expected to put ASEAN become (a) a single market and production base, (b) a highly competitive economic region, (c) a region of equitable economic development, and (d) a region fully integrated into the global economy. Specifically, it targets to free flows of goods, services, and skilled professionals<sup>2</sup>. Theoretically, freer movement of skilled labor will help bridge the above mentioned labor gap in the region, fulfilling the shortage of labor in higher income countries, while creating more employment and skills development for lower skilled workers in lower income countries. This will be a win-win solution that benefits for all stakeholders, including governments at both destination and origin and workers. However, there is still a lot of

<sup>1</sup> With the population of over 622 million people, ASEAN as a region has become the third largest economy in Asia and the seventh in the global.

<sup>2</sup> See more: ASEAN Secretariat (2015), *A Blueprint for Growth: ASEAN Economic Community 2015: Progress and Key Achievements*, Jakarta.

misunderstanding about how the recent regional integration initiatives mean for migration flows at both the region and country level.

In ASEAN, Thailand has become one of the main destinations for migrants from other ASEAN's member countries, especially neighboring countries<sup>1</sup>. It is also noted that there is a burgeoning increase in the number of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand over the last decade. Importantly, a large number of them are illegal workers who enter into Thailand as tourists. Economic reasons can be considered the primary reason for the movement. However, it seems that there is little concern about the significance of ASEAN regional cooperation for migration flow from Vietnam to Thailand over the years. This paper, thus, is expected to deal with the question.

### **Migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand: A Historical perspective**

The migration flow from Vietnam to Thailand is not a new phenomenon, but has been occurring for many centuries ago. The first presence of Vietnamese people in Thailand (or Siam before 1939) can be traced back from the 13<sup>th</sup> century since the establishment of Sukhothai state (Thin, 2003). Later period, at the reign period of King Narai (1656—1658), there were evidences that Vietnamese working at public works at the outskirts of Ayutthaya. However, until to the mid-17 century in the reign period of King Phutthayotfa or Rama I (1737—1809), the presence of Vietnamese was recorded more clearly. Accordingly, under the Tay Son brothers' uprising, Nguyen Phuc Anh or Nguyen Anh, a nephew of the last Nguyen Lord who ruled over southern Vietnam, fled the country to seek protection from the King Rama I. He went along with 1,000 followers to Siam in the 1780s. Initially, they were allowed to stay at Ban Ton Samrong and Tambon Khok Krabuu, but later they were moved to Ban Yuan Samsen and Bangpho in Bangkok (Sripana, 2013). They can be considered the first group of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand. Presently, the descendants of them live in the districts of Sapharn Khao and Nang Lerng (Sripana, 2013; Varophas, 1966).

In the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century, there were Vietnamese Catholics who fled the country with the guidance of a French bishop due to the anti-Catholic movement policies of Emperor Ming Mang (1791—1841)<sup>2</sup>. They came to settle in Thailand in 1827 and the descendants of the group can be found in Ban Yuan Samsen and Wat Kalawa in Bangkok (Varophas, 1966). However, due to the difference of religion, most of them still follow their religion belief and has become teachers at a Catholic school, namely St. Gabriel's College that run by French priest. There were also another group of Vietnamese Catholics who followed the French to come to Chanthaburee province in the 1894 as a part of French campaign to force Thailand to cede Lao territories to France. But, the Vietnamese did not go back Vietnam after the French returned the province to Thailand later (Varophas, 1966).

The next wave of Vietnamese flows into Thailand occurred trickling from the early 20 century to the Second World War. The movements stemmed from failures of rebellions against the colonial of the French in Vietnam. Siam at that time was also considered

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<sup>1</sup> About 2.7 million migrants from Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia are illegal migrant workers, making up more than 83 per cent of foreign migrant workers in Thailand (Huget, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Emperor Ming Mang or Nguyen Phuc Dam, the second Emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty was well known by his adoration of Confucian values. Thus, he restricted the French involvement in Vietnam and isolated Catholic priests at that time.

anti-colonial base for generations of Vietnamese, particularly Phan Dinh Phung, Phan Boi Chau and then Ho Chi Minh (Sripana, 2013). Meanwhile, many Vietnamese left their hometown in Central Region in Vietnam, crossed through Lao borders and settled in Thailand provinces along the Mekong River, mainly in Nakhon Phanom. All the Vietnamese migrated into Thailand before 1937 had been acquired Thai citizenship automatically because of the absence of the immigration law at that time (Varophas, 1966).

After the Second World War, an influx of less than fifty thousand Vietnamese came to Thailand (Poole, 1967). The Vietnamese refugees decided to leave the country by various reasons, including both political and economic motivation (Varophas 1966). In 1950, Thai government adopted stricter measures that control the Vietnamese in Thailand. Accordingly, roughly 35,000 Vietnamese refugees were repatriated between 1960 and 1964. Besides, the remaining Vietnamese refugees were allowed to stay in specific Northeastern provinces<sup>1</sup>. Many of the Vietnamese refugees resumed their previous occupations such as retail traders, shopkeepers and skilled work- men, such as carpenters, masons, mechanics, tailors, and electricians (Poole, 1967; Varophas, 1966). It is also noted that all the Vietnamese earned a much better living in Northeast Thailand than they could at their hometown (Poole, 1967).

It is, therefore, summary that the flows of Vietnamese people to Thailand has been occurring for centuries partly due to the geographic closeness between Vietnam and Thailand (or Siam before 1939). General speaking, the previous movements primarily stemmed from internal political issues.

### **The current pattern of migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand in the context of ASEAN regional cooperation**

The current pattern of migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand has also shown dynamic and complex. It can be seen from the following characteristics:

Migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand include labor migration and student migration. Of which, labor migration is dominant. There has been no formal statistic existence on the number of Vietnamese migrants in Thailand since most of them are illegal workers who entry into Thailand as a tourist and then stay to work. An estimation shows that there was roughly 50,000 Vietnamese migrant workers for the period of 2012–2014<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, there are about 1,100 Vietnamese students in Thailand (TMR 2014), and an insignificant number of people whom either work or doing business. Generally, labor migration can be considered the dominant trend in the current migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand.

In terms of migration reasons, the main motivation for Vietnamese migrants in Thailand is to get higher income and a better life (Walsh, 2011; SRIKHAM, 2012; Nguyen,

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<sup>1</sup> Initially, the Ministry of Interior allowed the Vietnamese refugees to remain in only 12 provinces, including Nongkhai, Udon Thani, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Roi Et, Maha Sarakham, Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathani, Sisaket, Surin, and Prachinburee. Then, the number of provinces were only five: Nakhon Phanom, Ubon Ratchathani, Nongkhai, Sakon Nakhon, and Prachinburee. See: (Varophas, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> The interview with Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Tat Thanh can be founded at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1dLK8fvkWM>

2016). Their main employment is garment work at tailor shops, waiters/waitress at restaurant, food stalls, or canteen, or salespersons at markets. Besides, there are also self-employed migrants who are mainly street vendors.

The current formation of the Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand reflects partly the continuity of the pattern of the former Vietnamese migrants in Thailand. As mentioned before, a majority of the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand since the early 20 century came from the Central region (Varophas, 1966). In the study of Nguyen (2016), a majority of the Vietnamese migrants in Bangkok came from the same region. It can be partly explained by the Central region in Vietnam is defined one of the prone to natural disasters, particularly in flood, flash floods, and drought due to its attributes of geographic and sloping topography. The disadvantages affect the livelihoods of local people, which motivated them to migrate to other places over the time. More importantly, it is also implied that the current flows of Vietnamese migrants has facilitated by either former migrants or oversea Vietnamese in Thailand. Their social networks such as personal or community networks have played an important role in ensuring successful migration from Vietnam to Thailand. The mutual assistance can be seen in different forms including lending money, providing support in accommodation and job search, guiding them to learn Thai language, culture and customs as well as guiding them how to cope with arrest risks, etc. (Nguyen, 2016).

Since the establishment of ASEAN, regional cooperation has resulted in a greater economic integration that promotes freer flows of trade and investment among the ASEAN members. With the development of Vision 2020, the Hanoi Plan of Action, and the 2003 Plan of ASEAN Community, there has been several major initiatives and agreements that facilitate regional labor cooperation including: i) the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS) (Mode 4 on movement of natural persons and Mutual Recognition Agreements — MRAs for professionals in eight fields: accountancy, engineering, surveying, architecture, nursing, medical services, dental services and tourism); ii) ASEAN Framework Agreement on Visa Exemption which aims to exempt citizens of any other Member Countries holding valid national passports from visa requirement for a period of stay of up to 14 days from the date of entry<sup>1</sup>; iii) The GMS Labor Migration Program<sup>2</sup>; and iv) The AEC integration plan (Toward an ASEAN labor market), etc. Notably, migration issues and rights of migrant workers should be also acknowledged by ASEAN leaders under the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrants Workers and the ASEAN Committee on Migrant Workers (ACMW)<sup>3</sup>. However, it is important to note that labor cooperation among ASEAN countries is not regulated by regional agreements, but bilateral agreements or cooperation between sending

<sup>1</sup> See more: [http://asean.org/?static\\_post=asean-framework-agreement-on-visa-exemption-kuala-lumpur-25-july-2006-2](http://asean.org/?static_post=asean-framework-agreement-on-visa-exemption-kuala-lumpur-25-july-2006-2)

<sup>2</sup> The aim of the program were: (McLaughlin) improve knowledge about labor migration in the GMS focusing on the socio-economic impact of migration on sending and receiving countries; (2) heighten awareness about these issues and their significance for poverty reduction at the highest levels of policy making and (3) strengthen the capacity of governments and development partners to refine and implement a regional system to facilitate and regulate labor migration.

<sup>3</sup> The Declaration was signed in 2007 in Cebu, the Philippines. In 2008, the first meeting of the ACMW was organized with emphasizing on four main issues: protection and promotion of the rights of migrant workers; promoting good governance mechanisms; human trafficking; and the development of a new ASEAN scheme for the rights of migrant workers.

and receiving countries. For Thailand, the government has made efforts in managing migrant workers in response to a dramatic increasing trend of illegal migration since the early 2000s. In particular, Thai authorities regularized irregular migrants from Myanmar, Lao, and Cambodia by signing MOUs on labor cooperation as well as by introducing regularization system with these governments<sup>1</sup>. Recently, it can be seen that Thai and Vietnamese governments have put more efforts in enhancing labor cooperation. Although the issue has been discussed since 2008, achievements are just able to reach in the late 2014 through Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha's official visit to Vietnam<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, in July 2015, the Thai government also signed an MOU on labor cooperation with the Vietnamese government which is believed to pave the way for enhancing regular migration flows and economic benefits for both sides. Most recently, Thai government has also issued work permits for Vietnamese migrant workers who work in restaurants, construction and fishing industries and domestic services on December 2015<sup>3</sup>.

Viewing migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand under the context of ASEAN regional integration, it is clear that the freer flow of skilled labor is still restricted since the progress of MRAs has still been very slow. However, it is argued that the movement of natural persons and unskilled labor has been facilitated over the years. The fact is that entering into Thailand has been become much easier since the visa exemption of ASEAN tourists came into effect. Before that time, there were very few migrant workers in Thailand because it took times and high cost for entering into the country. The migrants could not go alone during their journey, but used to ask a broker in assisting them to across borders and custom procedures. For now, Vietnamese migrants enter into Thailand as a tourist without assistance of a broker. Also, it is much easier for them to choose either bus or airplane to come to Thailand. According to Thai laws, they are required to leave the country after 30 days<sup>4</sup>. Thus, instead returning to Vietnam, they just need to leave the country at Cambodia or Laos border gates on the expired day and then make a reentry in order to continue to stay legally and work illegally in Thailand.

### Conclusion

It is argued that the flows of Vietnamese people to Thailand is not a new phenomenon, but has been occurring for centuries partly due to the geographic closeness between two

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Thai government has already signed MOUs with its neighboring countries' government include Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar in 2002 and 2003, respectively. Although MOU has just been an informal mechanism that governments use as an executive agreement, it has still ensured the rights of migrant workers as well as the needs of labor shortage.

<sup>2</sup> See: Vietnam Online Television, Interview with the Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Tat Thanh, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1dLK8fvkWM>

<sup>3</sup> Thailand's Ministry of Labor approved a resolution allowing Vietnamese migrants to register with authorities for the period of 1-30 December. According to the resolution, the Vietnamese migrants who had previously entered legally to Thailand before August 10, 2015 are allowed to work in the four sectors for one year in Thailand. Source: Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Kingdom of Thailand Portal, <http://www.vietnamembassy-thailand.org/vi/nr070521165843/nr070725012202/ns151130174127>

<sup>4</sup> Under the tourist visa exemption scheme, Vietnamese nationals are allowed visit to Thailand without a visa with stay for a period of up to 30 days. Source: Department of Consular Affairs, <http://www.immigration.go.th/nov2004/doc/services.pdf>

countries. It is implied that the formation of the current labor migration flows have been strongly by the two governments' migration management policies and the long-standing social networks, not by the recent ASEAN regional cooperation. However, it is important to argue that the regional integration has facilitated and strengthen labor migration flows from Vietnam to Thailand by improving infrastructure system and custom procedures. The flows have contributed to fulfill the labor shortage in Thailand as well as to ease high unemployment and underemployment rate in Vietnam. Thus, while the free flow of skilled workers has still restricted due to the slow progress of MRAs, the contribution of unskilled migrant workers should not be forgotten. The two governments need to collaborate in preventing human trafficking, protection from exploitation, access to skills training, and welfare provisions for workers by enhancing labor cooperation through official channels.

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## ПОТОКИ ТРУДОВОЙ МИГРАЦИИ ИЗ ВЬЕТНАМА В ТАИЛАНД В КОНТЕКСТЕ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ АСЕАН

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Международная миграция была всегда важной и комплексной проблемой в силу тесной связи с различными аспектами политического, социального и экономического развития регионов и стран. В АСЕАН, международная миграция всегда была одной из основных особенностей переходного периода развития АСЕАН (Чантаванич, Ито и Миддлтон, 2013). За последние десятилетия регион добился значительного и впечатляющего роста, став одним из самых динамично развивающихся экономических регионов в мире, а также глубже интегрировался в региональную и глобальную экономику. Возрос спрос на высококвалифицированных специалистов в странах с высоким уровнем дохода, в то время как снизился уровень рождаемости населения, что вызвало увеличение дефицита рабочей силы, например в Таиланде. Для стран с более низким уровнем дохода, наоборот, увеличивается уровень безработицы, например во Вьетнаме и Филиппинах.

**Ключевые слова:** трудовая миграция, Вьетнам, Таиланд, АСЕАН, региональная интеграция

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