

Social Network of Illegal Thai Migrants Working in Food Shops in Malaysia

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Abstract

People from the southern border provinces of Thailand (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun, and Songkhla) who migrate to work in food shops or so-called Tom Yam shops in Malaysia are in high numbers. The numbers of these migrants has been increasing over time due to the assistance of social networks. Many studies have mentioned about assistance of social networks on cross border migration. This study aims to investigate the origins and expansion of social networks in the southern border provinces involving people who migrate to work in Malaysia and also explore the roles of those peoples' social networks regarding migration to work in food shops in Malaysia. Data were collected by interviewing using a questionnaire. The study was conducted in destination areas in four northern states of Malaysia. The population sample was people who live in the southern border provinces of Thailand and who migrated to work in Malaysia. This study finds that the origin of social network of migrants who went to work in food shops arose from links with kin in Malaysia and also the cultural similarity of the migrants and the people in Malaysia who both speak Malayu and believe Islam. Beyond this, marital relations with Malaysian citizens make the social networking of migrants larger and more complex. The roles of social network have influence on three stages of migration: the pre-migration, the act of migration, and the post-migration. In the pre-migration stage, social networks both at the origin and destination areas, are sources of information about work positions in Malaysia and also provide help in getting jobs. In the act of migration stage, social networks help by ensuring that movers get to the job site in Malaysia. For the post-migration stage in destination areas, social network help provide accommodation and food as well as medical care for migrants. Migrants who work in food shops mostly are working in Malaysia without work permit which is a violation of Malaysian law. They are at risk of arrest by the police in Malaysia. The pertinent agencies of the Thai Government should help solve this problem in cooperation with the Malaysian Government.

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1. Introduction

The numbers of workers from the southern border provinces of Thailand who went to work overseas are negligible when compared to numbers of migrant workers from other regions of the country. In fact, many people in this area go to work abroad, particularly to Malaysia, but the statistics of those people have not been reported to the Department of Employment Services. This is because most of the migrant workers go to work in Malaysia by making their own arrangements rather than using the services of private recruitment agencies, taken from Department of Employment Services, or employers (Klanarong, 2003). Moreover, most people in this area use a border pass enter Malaysia then work while they get into Malaysia. A border pass is a document issued by government officials for people who live along the Thai-Malaysia border as a convenience to travel between the two countries. The official purpose of those leaving the kingdom of who hold a border pass is to visit a relative or to visit the states of Malaysia that border upon Thailand. Those people do not qualify as “migrant workers” according to Ministry of Labor.

Statistic from Malaysia Immigration Office as quoted by the Office of Labour Affairs, Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur (2010) reported that there were 18,456 Thai migrant legally working in Malaysia in 2007 with the majority (84%) of them in the service sector (See Table 1).

Table 1. Thai Migrant Worker in Malaysia by Occupation in 2007

Occupation	December 2007	Per cent (%)
Housework	426	2.3
Construction	1,122	6.1
Industry	793	4.3
Service sector	15,532	84.1
Planting	53	0.3
Agriculture	530	2.9
Total	18,456	100.0

Source: Office of Labour Affairs, Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, 2010

It is believed that there are about 100,000 Thai people illegally working in Malaysia. Most of them are from five southern border provinces (Songkhla, Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun). They enter Malaysia using either a tourist visa or a border pass.

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They work in agriculture, fishery, housekeeping, stores and restaurants (Office of Labour Affairs, Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, 2010). There will be more and more people from southern border provinces seeking employment in Malaysia due to the following reasons:

1. Economic situation: The low demand for labor in industry and agriculture sectors in the southern provinces leads to high unemployment. Since the people of southern Thailand, especially those who are Muslim, are unlikely to work in other parts of the country, they often travel to work in Malaysia.

2. Geographic location: The border between the southern provinces of Thailand and the northern Malaysian states have many crossings through which many transportation facilities are available making it easy for crossing the border (both legally and illegally).

3. Religious, linguistic, and cultural linkages: People living along the borders of both countries have long close relationships with each other. They have normally been able to cross the border to visit each other. They both are Muslim, use a similar language, and practice similar local traditions and culture.

4. Labor shortages in Malaysia: Malaysia has promoted development in the fields of agriculture, industry and tourism, with the result that there is a high demand for labor. Increasing numbers of unskilled and semi-skill foreign labors are hired to work in the agricultural, construction and service sectors.

5. Higher wages in Malaysia: The higher wage and a better chance of finding a job in Malaysia compared to Thailand are important factors encouraging Thai people in the southern border provinces to go work in Malaysia (Petchprasomkool, 2002).

People in the southern border provinces can go to work in Malaysia because of the help of their social networks. Prasompong and Songmuang (1990) indicated that social network played an important role in the migration of people living in the southern border provinces going to work in Malaysia. They concluded that people from Tan Yong Po District, Satun Province migrated to work in Malaysia when they knew there were jobs available for them through social network as follows:

1. People in Tan Yong Po who had earlier migrated to Malaysia and came back to the village and persuaded them to go along;
2. Malaysian employers who came to the village and had relatives in Satun or knew the families of migrant workers in the village very well;
3. Representatives of employers who were requested by the Malaysian employers to recruit workers for them.

Chaiyarn (2002) also found migrant workers from Satun Province going to work in Langawi Island, Malaysia by self-arrangement and they did not face problems due to their extended families helping them get jobs.

Traditionally, the theories for describing, explaining, or predicting international labor migration put much focus on economic factors which were believed to be the cause of migration. While less attention is given to social and cultural factors. This is because the concepts of study on migration mainly consider push and pull factors which have great impacts on migration. However, migration is a complicated process and the behavior of decision making to migrate is also complicated. Therefore, merely the push factors of origin communities and the pull factors of destination communities cannot fully explain patterns migration. The studies of migration in many regions of the world pay more attention to the Social Capital Theory: Migrant Networks (Boyd, 1989; Mantra, 1998; Chanthawanich et. al., 1999; Klanarong, 2003; Rainer and Siedler, 2009; Anjos and Campos, 2010; Curan and Saguy, 2011). Therefore, the purposes of this study are to study the origins and expansion of social networks of workers from the southern border provinces who migrate to work in Malaysia and to explore the roles of social network of people in the southern border provinces of Thailand who migrate to work in food shops in Malaysia.

2. Literature review: Social networks and international labor migration

Social networks are “sets of interpersonal ties that link migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in the origin and destination areas through the bonds of kinship, friendship and shared community origin” (Massey, 1988, p.396). The levels of connection are more or less depending on the familiarity of people and level of communication (Fuller, et al., 1983) While Pramaha Suthis Apakaro (2004) defines social network as relationship of human society in different levels in individuality, individuals and groups; groups with groups; and groups with organizations. This explains behaviors and relations of different matters such as activities, communications, cooperation, dependence, and learning exchange and so on. These relations have a variety of structures and patterns through human social network.

The social relationship that a person has for another person can be considered as one of the social network. The social network can be compared as points that link with many lines. Points are persons or communities and lines are social relationships. Therefore each person can be compared as a center point that links with other points or other persons. Those persons might have relationships with other persons whom the people of the center point never know. In other words, Na Chiangmai (1983) states everyone in the world knows and has relationships through a person who he/she knows.

For international migrant workers, it is unnecessary for migrant workers to be cut off from their origin communities when they move to work abroad. They can still keep in touch with the origin communities either directly or indirectly by visiting, sending letters,

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goods, presents, or money back to origin communities. This is the root of social networking in their villages. At the same time, their social networking extends to the destination communities. Therefore, the networks linking the origin and destination communities become key elements in sustaining and enhancing population flows between them (Hugo, 1998b, Mantra, 1998; Klanarong, 2003). As Hugo states that “The existence of social networks is a powerful factor influencing whether or not a person will move and also explains why some communities have high levels of emigration while others with seemingly similar economic contexts have very few migrants” (Hugo, 1998a, p.88)

The development of relationships creates a chain of migration. The origin communities move towards the destination communities due to the sharing of work. Migration from the communities takes place continually because of the benefits gained from the social network both in origin communities and the destination communities.

2.1 Origin and expansion of social network

There are studies from different regions of the world that show the originality of the social network of migrants. The expansion of the social network arose from mutual assistance.

Mantra (1998) studied the social network of Indonesians who went to work in Malaysia from three areas, namely East Flores, West Lombok, and Bawean Island. Mantra found that the social network of migrants from East Flores and West Lombok originated in post World War II when Japanese soldiers moved some Indonesians from East Flores to Sabah before they went back to Japan. Japanese soldiers left these Indonesians in Sabah. After that the process of migration continues from East Flores to Sabah. At present, many Indonesians migrate from east Flores to settle in Sabah. It is common to see migrants from the same area settling in Sabah.

The origin of the social network of people from Bawean Island was Muslims from the island who wanted to go to Mecca for their pilgrimage or Haj. They normally used the route via Singapore–Malaysia–Mecca. Before their trip to Mecca they often worked in Singapore or Malaysia to save money for their travelling expenses and for the religious ritual. After they came back from Mecca, some of them settled down in Singapore and Malaysia. The migrants from Bawean who live in Singapore and Malaysia still keep in touch with their relatives in Bawean. The connection creates a chain of migration which basically expands the flow of migrants from Bawean to Singapore and Malaysia. The existence of a system of social networking between the Indonesian workforce in Malaysia and local people in the origin communities facilitates the flow of migrant workers from Indonesia to Malaysia. In addition, the development of modern transportation and communication between two countries shortens the distance between two countries.

The origin and expansion of the social network of migrants from the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) to Thailand are similar to those of migrants from Indonesia to Malaysia. Chairaj (2009) found that people from one village in Sawannaket Province immigrated to Thailand because of a political change. Some immigrants moved on to third world countries; some remained and now live in Thailand in high numbers. After Laos opened to the world, those who were left in Thailand went home and persuaded their relatives from the village to migrate to work in Thailand. When the people in the community saw how those working in Thailand lived better and more conveniently, they were gradually interested in migrating (Chairaj, 2009, 157)

According to Tsuneda (2006), the origin of social network of migrants from the southern border provinces to go to work in Malaysia was usually found in women from the southern border provinces who went to work in Malaysia and subsequently married Malaysian men. They could have comfortable lives in Malaysia, educate their children and financially support their parents. Women who married Malaysian men became the important network in border areas. They opened the gate for their friends and relatives from Thailand to come to live, work, and study in Malaysia. The community where the Malay dialect is used in the southern border provinces becomes the informal personal network to find jobs in Malaysia without relying on middleman.

2.2 The roles of social network on labor migration

According to a study, the role of the social network for migrants from rural areas going to work in cities in China (Chen et al., 2001), it was found that 75.1 percent of migrants from the same village would cluster in the same destination community in order to have the same jobs. This is because the workers returned to their home villages during holidays and information about the destination community spread rapidly to people in the same village and other villages. Migrants who went to work in cities tore down the obstacles of migration because knowing people in the destination community reduced the risk of migration.

Several studies of migration from the southern border provinces of Thailand going to work in Malaysia found that the social network of migrant workers both in the origin community and destination community play major roles and result in the decision to work in Malaysia (Thaweessit,1986; Prasompong and Songmuang,1990; Wittayapreechakul, 1990; Chaiyarn,2002; Klanarong,2003; Tsuneda,2006).

A study by Wittayapreechakul (1990) focused on the role of social networks in labor circulation to Malaysia with a case study of Cha Rang Village, Yaring District, Pattani Province. She found that a social network did play a role in labor circulation to Malaysia. The networks function was to serve as a source of information about working and living

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conditions in the destination areas. This information included the jobs they would undertake, the distance in going to work, method of travel, travel costs and other costs, the nature of the work, wages, hiring procedures, benefits as well as sources of jobs or the community at the destination areas. She concluded that the assistance of social networks in both the origin area and destination areas facilitates and reduces uncertainty in labour circulation. With the help of their social network, migration to work in Malaysia is not difficult. Klanarong (2003) also found that international labor migration of females from the southern border provinces working in Malaysia used the long existing social network which made it convenient to go to work. The influence of social network can be found in clustering of work types and destination areas in Malaysia of migrants from each village. Moreover, the social network creates a sustainable and continual international labor migration.

3. Research Method

This study is an empirical and qualitative research. Data were collected by interviewing using a questionnaire. The study was conducted in destination areas in four northern states of Malaysia, namely Kedah, Perlis, Perak and Kelantan. The population sample in this study was people, both men and women, who live in the southern border provinces of Thailand and migrated to work in food shops in Malaysia.

Areas of study were purposely selected sampling. The target areas were communities or villages or towns in Malaysia where there are a number of people from the southern border provinces of Thailand have been working. The areas selected in the study are 12 towns as shown in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Table 2. Towns and States of Study

No.	Towns	States
1	Rantau Panjang	Kelantan
2	Pasir Mas	
3	Kota Bahru	
4	Taiping	Perak
5	Gerik	
6	Sungai Petani	Kedah
7	Pendang	
8	Alor Star	
9	Kulim	
10	Kuah	
11	Arau	Perlis
12	Kangar	

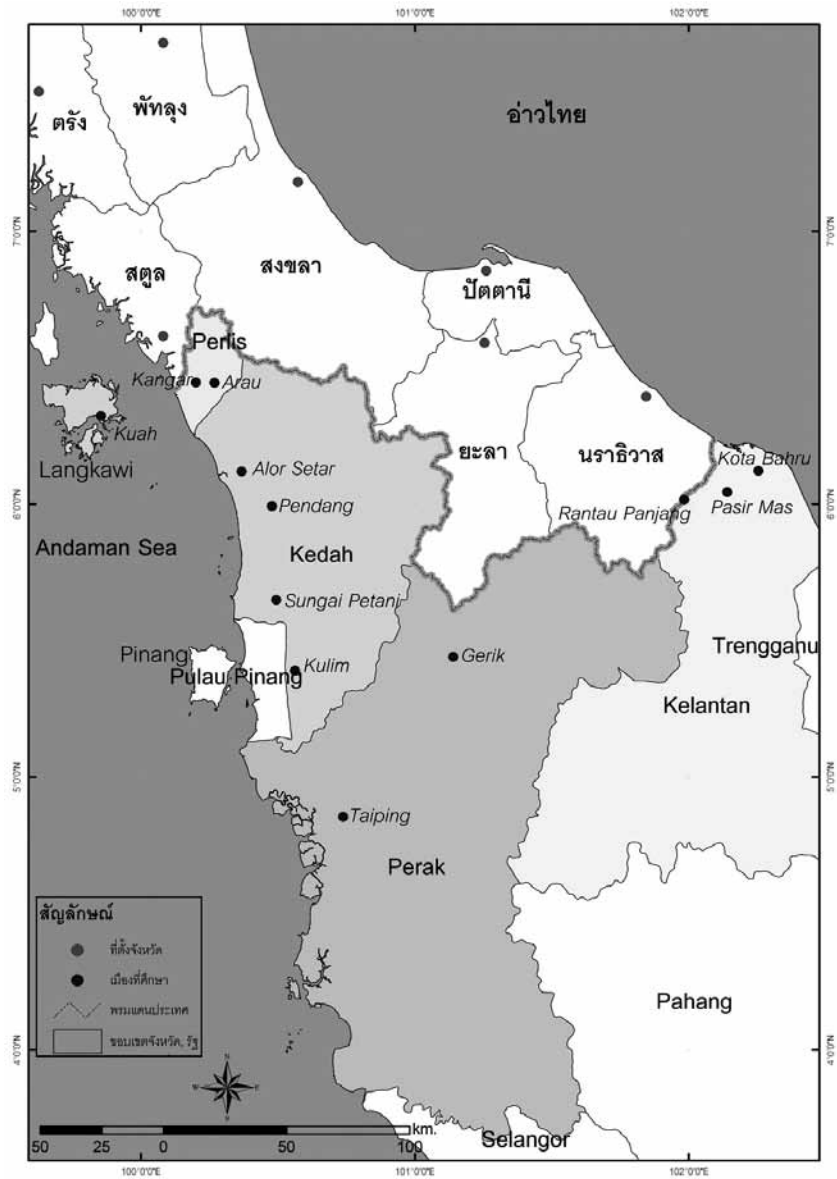


Figure 1. Areas of Study

4. The results of Study

4.1 Origin and expansion of social networks of Thai migrants in food shops in Malaysia

The origin and expansion of social networks of migrants from southern border

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provinces working in the food shops in Malaysia beside stem from ties that link people in the origin and destination areas through the bonds of kinship, friendship and shared community origin. There are tie through Malay Muslim ethnic and cultural similarity of the migrants and people in Malaysia, especially in language and religion. Moreover, the intermarriage of migrants with Malaysians enlarged and complicated the social networking of migrants.

The owner of the food shops who married Malaysians became the major social network of their employees in the shops. These employees could be relatives, in-laws, friends or neighbors. Migrant workers from the southern border provinces knew about the available jobs and job positions through their members of households, relatives and friends who had earlier migrated to Malaysia and came back to the village or telephone and persuaded them to go along. For example, a case of Nafisah, 18 years old, she decided to work in food shop at Arau in Perlis state since she was 14 years old because her aunt is the owner of the shop. Wae-rudeena, 24 years old, from Ban Yakang in Muang district in Narathiwat also said that her reason in working in food shop in Kota Bahru was because the owner of the shop is her relative. Malatee, 23 years old, from Tammalang sub-district, Muang district in Satun province, works in a food shop in Kuah, Langkawi Island. The owner of the shop comes from Satun and married with Malaysian man. She told that there are 30 female labors who are all from Satun province in her food shop. Most of them are



Figure 2. Thai female migrant works in food shop in Arau, Perlis state

from Tammalang because it is one of 6 sub-districts of Muang district of Satun province where people are Muslim and use Malayu in their daily life.

Women workers in food shops, especially those who are young and single or who are widows, sometimes get married with Malaysian men after working there a few months. Most of their husbands are customers of the food shops. If they marry Malaysians, they can open and operate their own shops on behalf of their husbands from which they can gain more income than if they were working as employees. This leaves more money for them to send back home. This allows them to better support their families in Thailand and also leads them to persuade their relatives and friends to work as employees in their shops as well. They have become a model for others to migrate for work in Malaysia where they hope to marry the Malaysians not just to escape the illegal employment status but also to become rich by being able to run their own shops. However not all such marriages are successful. Several workers had their marriage fail and they had to return to Thailand with their children born with Malaysian husbands, without any support from their Malaysian husbands or ex-husbands.

4.2 Roles of social network for migrating to work in food shops in Malaysia

The migration from the origin community to the same destination town and work in the same field including having the same employer affects the migration which leads to the connection between the origin community and the destination community. Such features result from the roles of the social network as being source of information and fundamental assistance.

The food shop owners, relatives, friends or neighbors who currently work in food shops in Malaysia are main sources of information about jobs position and/or jobs available in destination areas. For example, Nafesah and Sarenah were friends; they studied in the same school. Sarenah came to work after Nafesah. She came to work in Perlis because her friend and her relative from Chana district, Songkhla, convinced her.

The act of migration stage starts when migrant workers travel to the destination community. The former migrants from the same origin communities will help new migrant workers about the documents of leaving and entry the country at the border check points and accompany them to work places. The owner's food shops sometime use their personal vehicles took their employees to travel back and forth between Thailand and Malaysia.

At the destination community, when migrants enter Malaysia, the owners provide accommodation, meal and health care. If migrants are sick, they will be sent to clinics and the owners will take care of the expenses. Migrants who worked in food shops in Langkawi told that their employers are not taking advantage of them. Their accommodations and meals (three per day) were provided for. They reported that they

were looked after well when they were sick. Such assistance from the owners especially providing jobs, accommodations, meals and health care made the number of migrants from the southern border provinces increase greatly.

Although migrants from the southern border provinces went to work in food shops with the help from the social network in terms of getting jobs and necessary different welfare while working in Malaysia, most migrants used the border pass to return to the country and worked without a valid work permit which was illegal in Malaysia. These migrants had to live and work with fear. They suspected that when they would be arrested by Malaysian officials. They became stressed and such symptoms affected the laborers' mental health (Klanarong et al., 2011). During the field trip, the researcher found that the owner in Arau, Perlis was just arrested and was fined more than 200,000 Bath. The owner and her employees from Pattani Province continuously looked nervously around during the interview. The reason why some Thai workers don't request a work permit is that the fee was too expensive when compared with their wages. Employment in food shops is categorized under the service sector. Expenses for taxes, foreign labor health care, work permits, and social security insurance are increased.

5. Conclusion

The social and cultural conditions of migrants from the southern border provinces and people in Malaysia are similar, especially the practice Islam and the Malay language. In addition, there are relationships by marriage with Malaysians. This creates a social network of migrants in the destination community and plays major roles in the migration from the southern border provinces to work in Malaysia, especially migrants who work in food shops. Their social network play important roles in giving information especially job available in Malaysia as well as assistance in getting job. However, migrants hired to work in food shops also have disadvantages such as the lack of freedom, the feeling of insecurity at work in Malaysia because of their illegal status are inconsistent, fear and worry about their situation. Suggestions for Thai government and official sectors in the southern border provinces:

1. Government organizations should have criteria regarding illegal labor migration without work permits especially laborers who will be employed in the food shops. The concerned organizations should make the employment legal to reduce stress, fear, illegal residency, and arrests.
2. Government organization in the areas of the southern border provinces should provide jobs and working opportunities for the residents. The jobs should be associated with social and cultural conditions of the residents so that the residents

will not rely merely on their migration to work in Malaysia and income for the population can be secured.

3. The Thai government should negotiate a compromise with the Malaysian government regarding migrants work in food shops especially waiters. For instance, the fee for redemption for work permit or the fee reception for employment in food shops in Kelantan, Perak, Perlis and Kedah the same as the employment of working in the rice field.

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