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Moving on the Chain: Push-Pull Factors Affecting the Migration of Laotian Workers to Udon Thani, Thailand

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Abstract

The tendency of migration of Lao workers to Thailand is likely to increase especially migration pattern is social network. The objective of this research was to study factors effecting the migration through social network of Lao workers in Udon Thani. Qualitative research method was applied in the study. Unit of analysis was group level. In-depth interview guideline was applied to collect data from 15 Laotian workers. The research site was Udon Thani, Thailand. Participatory observation and non-participatory observation were use for additional data collection. The ATLAS.ti programme was applied to categorize data, and data analysis was based on the content analysis method. The research results showed that the crucial push factors which contributed migration among Laotian workers included Udon Thani Unemployment in residency, and low revenue in residency and important pull factors include higher compensation, worker demand of establishments in Udon Thani province, Laotian employers' values in Udon Thani, and social network of Laotian workers in destination.

Keywords: Social Network, Migration, Push factors, Pull factors, Laotian workers

Introduction

Labour migration is a global phenomenon which has been observed over the world. Tendency of labour migration has been increasing due to the development of socio-economics and advancement of technology (IMU, 2008). In Southeast Asia, labour migration occurs due to a different rate of economic development in ASEAN countries. Burma is the country where send the most workers to destination countries, followed by Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam respectively. Here, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand are counted as the destination country. It is to say that labour migration in Southeast Asian Region is an output of economic development of ASEAN countries (Chamaratana, 2016)

Thailand has been considered as origin country and destination country (Chamaratana et al, 2554), since economic change of Thailand in past decades boosted economic growth in Thailand. A huge number of development project has been settled up in Thailand especially development project on infrastructure facilities and industrial sector. Those conditions has caused the flow of labour migration in Thailand. In addition, Thailand currently is becoming the aging society, and it resulted in a decrease of working-aged people. In addition, the working-aged people seems not to work as workers due to higher education they received. This circumstance tends to be contrast with current country's economic which is growing and need more unskilled workers to serve industry (Kulkolkarn, 2010).

Udon Thani is a city located in northeastern region of Thailand. Udon Thani nowadays is growing rapidly due to the growth of economics. According to statistics of Udon Thani Economics (2013), the provincial economic revenue of Udon Thani is 8.5 billion Baht (257.5 million USD), GDP is 52,000 Baht/year (1,575.76 USD/year), total loan is 6.3 billion Baht (190.9 million USD), and total deposit of 4.9 billion Baht (148.5 million USD). Economic growth rate is increasing 5 % comparing to year 2008, and 100% comparing to year 2003 (The Udon Thani Provincial Office of The Comptroller General, 2013). A massive economic growth rate offers a huge number of employment slot in Udon Thani However, it appears that number of unskilled workers in Udon Thani is insufficient due to the fact that many Thai workers have their own lands so that they prefer doing agriculture in their own lands to working in some unskilled jobs. These are reasons why Udon Thani needs migrant workers to serve economic sector. (Thongyou and Ayuwat, 2005)

Udon Thani located 70 Kilometers away from Vientiane capital of Lao PDR, and there are international bus that serve passengers travelling from Udon Thani to Vientiane capital. Moreover, people from those two cities have shared same culture. They have similar language and traditions. These conditions encourage a number of Lao worker moving to work in Udon Thani through their social networks, which are labour broker network and their relatives (Chamaratana, 2010). Migration through social network is necessary for Laotian migrants in order to ensure security during they are working abroad such as jobs, housing, and etc. Moreover, social network reduces risk on

migration, such as human trafficking, exploitation by employers, etc. (Chamaratana et al, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, research question has been set up to explore what are factors encouraging migration through social network of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani. Findings of the study are advantage to governmental organizations and private organizations that are working on migrant workers to cope with an increasing of migration circumstance practically. That let us to research objective as to investigate factors encouraging migration through social network of Lao labour in Udon Thani, Thailand.

Conceptual Framework Development

This paper investigated factors encouraging migration through social network of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani. The study applied academic concepts including **1) Migration**, which explores meaning of migration and factors influencing on migration, and **2) Social Network**, which describes meaning of social network as following details.

Migration; a concept of migration refers to the movement from one place to another place. International migration means the movement of people across state or country's boundary. Purposes of the movement are to settle permanently at destination areas, or look for jobs. In addition, migration can be made legally and illegally (Applyard, 1992).

Everett S. Lee (1996) describes factors that influenced on migration. Migration consists of four elements including 1) push factor; which is factor that forces migrants to move out of origin area, 2) pull factor; is factor that encourages migrants moving to destination area. 3) Intervening of sets of obstacles, which is the condition, such as law, that obstructs migrants to move to another places, and 4) personal factor that causes decision of migration. Personal factors appears differently among migrants.

This paper aims to investigate push factors and pull factors, which are important factors of the migration, and it is essential to explain migration circumstance of Laotian migrant workers in Thailand.

Social Network; is an interrelationship among individuals, groups, or organizations, who share same goals, rules, and resources together. Functions of social network also coordinate and create interrelationships to each other through mindset of individuals and activities that individuals do together. In addition, interaction of social networks relate to roles of individuals within the network (Niratrom, 2000; Niyomna et al, 2009; Chamaratana, 2011).

Moreover, social network can be considered as another type of collaboration among people within the network, and it is useful to analyze behavior of people. Social network is a social phenomenon that expresses social relations among individuals (Ponpanatham et al, 2010; Chamaratana, 2011).

Therefore, the definition of social network is applied to the study to explain factors encouraging migration through social network of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani as a figure below (see figure 1).

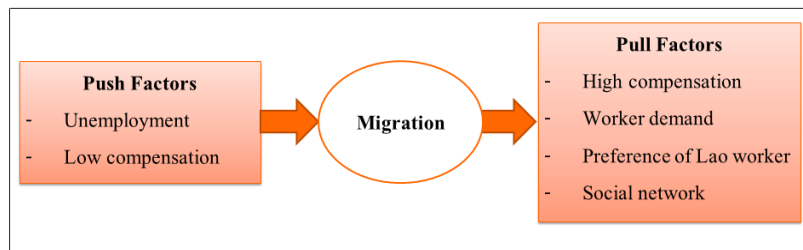


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Research Methodology

This paper applied qualitative methodological approach to the study, and unit of analysis was group level. Key informants consisted of fifteen Laotian migrant workers who immigrated to Udon Thani, Thailand, legally and illegally through their social networks. Criteria of key informants including 1) key informants must be Laotian migrant workers, 2) they must work in Udon Thani. 3) They used social network as a mechanism to assist moving to Udon Thani, 4) key informants were experienced in recruiting other Laotian migrant workers to work in Udon Thani, and 5) they all are in the same social network. In-depth interview, participatory observation, and non-participatory observation were used as research tool. For in-depth interview, we use interview guideline which content validity approved by two experts.

Data collection started with contacting employers in Udon Thani. We introduced ourself to employers, and explained research objective to employers. Thus, researcher asked for permission to employers to collect research data from Laotian migrant workers. Once researcher and Laotian migrant workers met each other, researcher made appointment with Laotian migrant workers to interview on later date.

Data analysis was made briefly during the interview, and it would be analyzed carefully based on conceptual framework of the study after the interview. Data, thus, was categorized and analyzed by the ATLAS.ti platform. In addition, analytical description was used to present research findings.

Findings

This paper presented empirical findings in three topics including 1) characteristics of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani, 2) push factors of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani, and 3) pull factors of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani.

Characteristics of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani

Most Laotian migrant workers who worked in Udon Thani is female worker. Interviewed Laotian migrant workers consisted of nine female workers and six male workers, who aged between 18 to 30 years old. Most of them did not graduate junior high school because they were poor and their families could not support education expense for them. Laotian migrant workers experienced in migration 2-5 times averagely. Agriculture, self-employed job, and industrial jobs were prior occupations before they moved to work in Udon Thani. Since they were in Udon Thani, five of them worked at noodle restaurant, five of them worked at livestock farms, and another five worked at Som Tam (Papaya Salad – the favorite local food) restaurant. In addition, it was found that most of Laotian migrant workers came from the same community.

Push factors of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani

Unemployment in Lao PDR

Laotian migrant workers who migrated through social networks to work in Udon Thani, most of them did not work on a regular basis. Their works mostly based on agricultural tasks, which operated on seasonal basis such as in wet season (eg. rice cultivation), or harvesting in winter season. However, in off-season, they were unemployed, so it resulted in financial insecurity of the families. They did not have sufficient income to support all family members, while the cost of living in Laos is high.

To solve this problem, Laotian migrant workers tried to look for jobs near their own communities. Some of them got a short-contracted job, while some of them were getting a job in factories, where located nearby Vientiane capital. Although they got higher income from those jobs, they had to pay other expenses such as travelling, meals, accommodation, etc. Therefore, they did not have much money for savings. They had only money to spend in each day.

When their social networks encouraged them to work in Udon Thani, Thailand. Those who interested in would ask about job details, income, and lifestyle in Udon Thani as Mr.Tong said for example;

“Once I finished rice cultivation, I stayed at home and had nothing to do. My friends who have worked at Udon Thani came to my house. He convinced me to work together at Udon Thani. I firstly consulted with my parents, and they were okay if I agreed to work. Therefore, I decided going with my friend because I trusted him. My friend and I knew each other very well for a long time. I then went to governmental bureau to get the passport” (interviewed on September 18, 2017)

Unemployment in Lao PDR is one of major factors contributing the migration, and the social network that they had at Udon Thani functioned the migration as a supporter in which encouraged Laotian migrant workers to work at Udon Thani easier. In this

case, social network was presented as his friends who encouraged Lao worker with information about income they would get in Udon Thani.

Low income in Lao PDR

Low income is a crucial issue that directly affected livelihoods of Lao families. Background of Lao families mostly based on agricultural activity. They were poor and lived in rural area. Financial issue was a primary issue that caused education problem of young family members. When families could not have sufficient income, their family members could not attend higher education. Many of Lao children have to leave school to work for families.

The study found that when migrant workers stayed at their homes, they did not have regular income. They did agricultural tasks which provided low income to families. Moreover, they also faced with a circumstance of low production price and natural disaster such as drought and flood. Some years they only had agriculture products to consume within the household, the evidence example as Ms. Dee mentioned.

“Once I stayed at home, I did rice farming. I had sufficient rice for livings. However, some years my rice field was flooded, and I did not have rice to eat. Sometime I had to ask my relative for rice. I also grew vegetables, but it provided small amount of income. I got few money in each month” (interviewed September 18, 2017)

Due to those reasons, families of Laotian migrant worker were not able to generate sufficient incomes. This became a reason that pushed them to work outside community in order to support families. Some went to work in the factory, while some worked at restaurants in Vientiane capital.

In conclusion, low income and poverty among Lao families is a crucial factor that influenced on migration. Laotian migrant workers had to work outside their hometown to support their families. When they accumulated sufficient income, some of them would return their home. They would change occupation to improve the quality of life of the families.

Pull factors of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani

Higher income

Income is the first factor that Laotian migrant workers concern when they migrated to work in Udon Thani, since they needed more incomes to support family expenses at origin area, for instance, living expenses, education expense, etc. the evidence example as Mr. D mentioned.

“Firstly I heard that working in Udon Thani was a well-paid option. You easily got at least THB 9,000 each month, or you could get THB 300 daily. It is hard to find such a well-paid job in Laos. It is impossible for those who did not graduate school to get a good job” (interviewed September 18, 2017)

Laotian migrant workers decided working in Thailand because of higher wage, and they did not pay too much for living expenses because they had relatives or colleagues, who previously worked in Thailand, took care of them during they are working in Thailand. It resulted in Laotian migrant workers had much remittance to send to their households, the evidence example as MS.A said.

“It is reasonable for migrants to get THB 9,000. Moreover, you can stay with employers. Employers normally provide accommodation to Laotian migrant workers. You can save money as much as you could. If you work in Laos, you get THB 5,000, and you had to pay for accommodation. It is difficult to save money” (interviewed September 18, 2017)

According to statement above, Laotian migrant workers compared wage between Laos and Thailand. They concluded that working in Thailand could be better than working in Laos. Many of them, thus, decided migrating to Thailand. Income they got in Udon Thani was between THB 8,000-12,000. Most of Laotian migrant workers worked at restaurants and livestock farms. Employers would offer free accommodation and meals. Laotian migrant workers spent some money for personal expenses, and a large portion of the wage would be sent to their families in Laos. Comparing to the factory job in Laos, workers would get monthly THB 3,000-4,000. It was impossible to save money, since they had to pay for accommodation, meals, and travelling cost.

Worker demand in Udon Thani

Udon Thani currently has been facing with labour shortage especially unskilled worker. Many unskilled workers were working in agricultural sector, but there were a huge number of job available in service sector. Therefore, it was an opportunity for Laotian migrant workers to find job in Udon Thani. Working in Udon Thani was not difficult for Laotian migrant workers, since people in those two countries shared similar culture such as language, tradition, etc. Moreover, Udon Thani located not far from Thai-Lao border, and there were convenient transportation system to serve people from two countries, such as international bus or train.

Due to those reasons, it caused number of Laotian migrant workers living in Udon Thani was higher than migrant workers from other GMS countries. Moreover, employment demand in agricultural sector, service sector, and industrial sector are still high, and it resulted in vary jobs available for Laotian migrant workers, the evidence example as Ms.Koy mentioned.

“Previously the shop I worked for was small. There were only two workers. Later, the business was growing. The owner decided expanding the shop, and he needed more workers. I then took my brother from Laos to work together” (interviewed November 29, 2017)

Economic growth in Udon Thani caused more job positions, but domestic workers could not support employment demand. Therefore, Laotian migrant workers were option for employers especially on the jobs that Thai workers considered as dirty job, hard job, and low-paid job.

Employment trends on Lao worker among employers in Udon Thani

Thai employers preferred Laotian migrant workers to Thai workers because Laotian migrant workers would be diligent, and the wage was lower than Thai worker's wage. Almost Laotian migrant workers had only one purpose in Thailand. They wanted to make money as much as they could. When they had enough money, they would back home and started small business. Therefore, Laotian migrant workers would work very hard to make money. This was different from Thai workers. Thai workers had more chances to choose jobs. They might change jobs immediately once they found new opportunity. This was why labour shortage became a major issue in Udon Thani, the evidence example as Ms.C said.

“My boss said she don't want to hire Thai workers because Thai workers always come to work late, and they have many requirement of working. They can't work hard. It's different from Laotian migrant workers.” (interviewed September 18, 2017)

Moreover, some Thai employers preferred hiring Laotian migrant workers due to low wage paid. Wage of Laotian migrant workers was lower than Thai worker's wage. Employers would like to recall Laotian migrant workers, who were in their labour network, to work with them again once labour shortage arose as Ms. A said.

“At that time the shop needed more workers. My employer asked me to work at his shop again because I was ex-employee at his shop. We had a contact each other such as Facebook, or Line. I had nothing to do in Laos, so I said okay. Another reason is; my boss contacts me directly. He said he really wanted me to work for him. I appreciated him” (interviewed September 18, 2017)

According to information above, it is concluded that Thai employers in Udon Thani, who had ever hired Laotian migrant workers, preferred Laotian migrant workers to Thai workers. Moreover, there was an encouragement of migration among Laotian migrant workers. Laotian migrant workers would be rewarded by Thai employers once they recruited Laotian migrant workers to work for Thai employers during labour shortage circumstance.

Social network of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani

Social network is another factor that influenced on migration. Laotian migrant workers used advantage from their own social network to help working in Udon Thani. Social network performed through kin relationship. Laotian migrant workers normally convinced their relative to work in Udon Thani, and they would prepare travelling details for the new comers, the evidence example as Ms.A reported.

“I allowed him to prepare my travelling. When he had completed everything, he and I made appointment to go to Udon Thani. I asked him to pick me up at my house because I never go to Udon Thani. He came to my house, and crossed the border. I worked immediately when I arrived Udon Thani. He would introduce me to others, and advise me to work” (interviewed September 18, 2017)

Social network is a mechanism to ensure that migration to work in Udon Thani would be smoothly. Laotian migrant workers decided moving to work because they trusted persons who were in social network, mostly were their relatives. Moreover, Laotian migrant workers would be safe if they came to work with their relatives. They would be safe from human trafficking or exploitation.

Social network is another pull factor which influenced on migration. Social network would have major impact on migrant workers, since most of social networks of Laotian migrant workers were relative each other, such as siblings, or close friends. This was a reason why Laotian migrant workers had confidence in migration, and they made a decision to migrate easily.

In conclusion, both push factors and pull factors are influenced on migration of Laotian migrant workers. Push factors consist of unemployment in Lao PDR, and low income in Lao PDR. While pull factors consist of higher income in Udon Thani, worker demand in Udon Thani, and employment trends among Thai employers. Thai employers prefer Laotian migrant workers to Thai workers because Laotian migrant workers are diligent, and they share similar culture such as language. In addition, the wage paid to Laotian migrant workers is lower than Thai worker’s wage, and social network is a mechanism to ensure safety during they are working in Udon Thani.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Push factors that influenced on migration of Lao worker consist of two causes including 1) unemployment in Lao PDR, and 2) low income in Lao PDR. This result is supported by Suwicha (2008), Laosai (2012), and Wannahong (2016) who suggested that push factors of migration in Laos are poverty and high unemployment rate in Laos. Those migrants are considered as surplus labour who are not able to find jobs in Laos. While pull factors consist of conditions including 1) higher income in Udon Thani, 2) worker demand in Udon Thani, 3) employment trends among Thai employers, and 4) social network of Laotian migrant workers in Udon Thani. These conditions are supported by Suwicha (2008), and JungJing (2016) who suggested that high employment wage in Thailand is a priority that convinces Laotian migrant workers come to work in Thailand, while employment availability and social network are important as well. Wannahong (2016) also suggested that decision of migrating to Thailand has been made easily when Laotian migrant workers have their networks at destination country. Friend, neighbors, or relatives who have moved to Thailand earlier would facilitate the new comers, and encourage them to live in Thailand smoothly.

The research result show that effect from social network contribute to the decision to migrate more. So that, Department of employment ministry of labour, Thailand deserving has measures receive migration from social network. When it was discovered that Laotian migrant workers has migration with relatives who used tourist passports to doubt beforehand that is migrating to work. And signing a letter of intent to work and then came the registration of labor later.

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