

The Migratory Pattern of Unskilled Labour from the Middle-class Background: A Case Study of Thai Technical Intern Trainees in Japan

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Abstract

While previous studies show that Thai migrant workers are poor peasants from rural areas of Thailand, socio-economic statuses of people in those areas after the 1990s have improved as a consequence of the development in these decades. This insight provides a new perspective to understand the migration of Thai workers nowadays for it implies the change in their class background. Through a case of Thai technical intern trainees taking low-wage and laborious jobs in Japan, this study explores socio-economic statuses of Thai migrant workers. The findings show that, from their occupations, incomes and education, they are considered as the new middle class in Thailand. This study highlights the change in migrant workers' class background which has implications for studying their migratory pattern.

Research background and purpose

A number of Thai migrant workers are employed by Japanese enterprises of various sectors through the technical intern trainee programme. The programme allows Japanese companies to employ foreign workers as intern trainees for 3 to 5 years. Previous studies criticise that it is a channel through which Japanese SMEs can employ foreign workers in 3D (dangerous, demeaning, dirty) jobs which are facing with a labour shortage. And because those jobs require not many skills, the initial objective of the programme to nurture human resources for developing countries seems to be missing out (Budsuen, 2011; Suzuki, 2001). Despite the criticism, the number of Thai trainees has been increasing continuously. It is important to identify characteristics of these trainees to understand their migratory flows.

Previous studies on Thai migrant workers, particularly between the 1970s – 1990s, shows that most of the workers were poor peasants migrating from rural areas of Thailand. Attributed to deprived conditions in rural areas, Thai peasants had migrated to labour markets either in urban areas or aboard. However, recent studies on rural Thailand give an important insight into understanding socio-economic changes in Thailand. Development in rural areas in these three decades led to social mobility in rural society. Apichat Satitniramai, Yukti Mukdawijitra and Niti Pawakapan (2013) characterized the rural Thai people the emerging middle-class or the lower-middle-class.

Basing on this backdrop, the purpose of this study is to show the socio-economic status of Thai technical intern trainees in Japan. Through my fieldworks in Saitama and Mie prefectures, I have collected data by interviewing a number of Thai technical intern trainees. Moreover, the results are improved by insights derived from the discussions with a Thai government official in charge of the labour affairs as well as a number of specialists in the field of migration studies.

Results/Achievements

Findings in this study are from my interviews with Thai technical intern trainees living in different prefectures in Japan in 2020. It is found that in term of their occupation, most of the trainees were working as office workers, factory workers, service staff in food and beverage shops and electricians etc. In term of incomes, the data show that the trainees who were employed before the departure to Japan earned an income of more than 5,000 baht. The lowest income earned by these people was around 8,000 – 9,000 baht per month, while the highest income ranged between 25,000 and 30,000 baht per month. Comparing to occupations and the 5,000-baht-income indicators in the study of Aphichart, these migrant workers are stratified to the new middle class in Thailand.

In addition to occupations and incomes, I can see the change in the educational background of the migrants. While most of Thai migrant workers in the past finished only primary education, in this study it is found that most of the trainees had finished the tertiary education, either a bachelor degree or a high vocational certificate.

This study highlights the significance of considering the social class of migrant workers transnationally. Working as unskilled labour with 3D jobs and low wage in Japan, their social class is stratified to the lower class in the Japanese social hierarchy. However, when we see their socioeconomic status transnationally, we will find that their status back in Thailand is different. Having a new middle-class background implies that Thai migrant workers nowadays have different aspirations, expectations and resources for their migration from the previous study about international migration of Thai workers.

Plans for further research

For further research, I will answer relating questions; such as “why they want to migrate even knowing that they will transform to a labourer in the country of destination?” and “what is the process through which they transform to the lower class in Japan?”

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Visiting a house of Thai technical intern trainees in Saitama Prefecture



Visiting a dormitory of Thai technical intern trainees in Mie Prefecture