

## RESEARCH ARTICLES

### Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand - Implications for Leveraging Migration for Development

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**Abstract:** A greater flow of people to and from each of the Mekong countries is catching the attention of the general public and academic researchers. As one of the fastest growing countries in the GMS, Thailand is attracting the majority of migrant workers from its neighbours. At a smaller scale, when compared with those from Lao PDR, Cambodia and Myanmar, Vietnamese workers are also joining this increasing trend in immigration to Thailand. By analyzing information from secondary data sources, this research paper attempts to provide further insights into the social and economic impacts generated by the Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand both at home and the host country. The study discovers that moving to Thailand for work has eased the pressures of rural unemployment and underemployment that have plagued Vietnam recently. Meanwhile, Vietnamese workers are helping soothe the stress caused by the increasing demand for unskilled and low skilled labourers in Thailand. The study further learns that the long-established community of Vietnamese migrants in Thailand is encouraging the increasing movement of Vietnamese workers to Thailand. The study findings suggest meaningful implications for future policies in leveraging labour migration for development.

**Keywords:** *Vietnamese migrant workers, cross-border migration, labour, employment, remittances, networks, Thailand, Greater Mekong Subregion.*

#### Introduction

One fine day, the Vietnamese migrant workers at one private school owned by a Thai person of Vietnamese ethnicity in Nong Bua Lamphu, Thailand hurriedly left the school ground and took shelter in a local Buddhist temple as they were told that the police were approaching to arrest them for their illegal status in Thailand (Le, 2011). The situation was described vividly in his blog by the Vietnamese Catholic Minister in Thailand, Minister Le Nhan Tam. This is the reality that

Vietnamese workers, many of whom attempt to cross the border and seek employment without a working permit and visa in Thailand, have to face almost every day. Those Vietnamese labourers are forming a distinguished group of migrants in Thailand, whose motivations, economic and social characters are different from those Vietnamese who emigrated and settled across Thailand between the Ayutthaya period, before the reign of King Narai and the reign of King Rama VI of the Rattanakosin period. While that generation of Vietnamese was forced to leave their motherland because it was embroiled in endemic warfare and religious political persecutions (Jantawimol, 1998; Rattanaworameteeekoon, 2007; Walsh, 2011), the newly arrived ethnic Vietnamese in Thailand cross the border more for economic reasons. Those reasons and the effects of the migration are the subjects of this research paper.

### **Analytical Framework**

Seeking employment in another country is not a new phenomenon. It has become an increasingly important feature in a globalizing world in regards to its scale, frequency, modes and directions of mobility. Many theories have been developed to explain this phenomenon. The neoclassical economic equilibrium theory argued that the distribution level of labour and capital stimulated cross-border labour migration. In some countries and regions, labour is plentiful and capital is scarce, which leads to low wage levels. Meanwhile, the situation is opposite in other countries where there is abundant capital but labour shortages and so high wages. The difference in wages encourages workers from low wage regions to look for jobs in regions where wages are higher. Wage levels and employment opportunities in destination regions influence migration decisions. Migration increases along with the development of industry, commerce and transport (Ravenstein, 1885, 1889).

Not being satisfied with the explanation by neoclassical economists that migration is purely economic, authors of the decision-making theory added individual choice rationales to the broader structures of rural-urban and developmental inequalities. In so doing, they proposed various factors that influence the decision to look for jobs in other places. Lee (1966) proposed four factors: factors associated with place of origin (such as poverty, unemployment, rapid growth population, low social status etc), factors associated with place of

destination (such as employment opportunities, better living conditions etc), intervention obstacles (physical barriers, cultural differences, migration laws) and personal factors (personal or family characteristics, knowledge about conditions in other countries) (Lee, 1966). The relative deprivation theory discovered three variables leading to the decision to migrate: increasing household income as well as improvement of economic conditions in the community and attaining a higher level of status (Runciman, 1966). Sell and de Jong (1978) (in Kumpikaite and Zickute, 2012) proposed the motivation decision theory in which migration decisions were overwhelmingly based on four motivations: (1) Possibility (migration is possible of physical and psychological support), (2) Motive (e.g. the motive could be economic success), (3) Expectation (e.g. migration is to make money), (4) Incentive (Kumpikaite and Zickute, 2012). In general, the decision-making theory argued that different people reacted to various combinations of push and pull factors in different ways given their ages, social and economic status as well as their personalities (King, 2012).

The dual labor market theory divides the economy into two parts, called the "primary" and "secondary" sectors (Piore, 1979). Attractive jobs are located in the primary sector while dirty, dangerous and difficult (3D) jobs are found in the secondary sector. Native citizens take more attractive jobs and leave 3D jobs for foreign workers (Jennissen, 2006). For undocumented foreign workers, in particular, they have no choice but to accept those types of jobs and, in any case, such jobs may nevertheless be preferable to poverty and unemployment in the country of origin (King, 2012).

The network theory focused on the interpersonal connections among migrants as well as between them and networks in host countries. The process of migration was facilitated by the communication of migrants with relatives, friends and former migrants (Massey *et al.*, 1993). It has also been observed that early immigrants can become entrepreneurs in recruiting co-nationals through a network to join an ethnic enclave (Fussell, 2012). Unlike the neoclassical and decision-making approaches, the network theory has been extended to incorporate the role of remittances in migration motivation (Djajic, 1986, Taylor, 1999). The interpersonal ties connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in both the origin and destination areas through bonds of friendship, kinship and shared community of origin. These social bonds explain why migrants send money back home for non-migrant members in the family (King, 2012).

Moving away from the hypothesis that migration is a decision made by individual migrants, the new economics of labour migration viewed migration in terms of family-level strategies to raise income, minimize and spread risk and, thus, loosen constraints in sending areas (Stark, 1978; 1991). In an effort to improve their livelihoods, households are employing different strategies to diversify employment and resources. Diversification helps households cope with adversity, results in higher incomes and improves skills and uses of natural resources (Allis and Ellsion, 2004). Cross-border migration is among those household diversification strategies (Aung Set, 2009). Migrant remittances have become integral parts of the household's economic survival strategies (Leinbach and Watleins, 1998). In other words, remittances provide income insurance for households of origin (De Haas, 2008).

There is another trend in migration studies, in which the concept of 'the cross-border turn' is extensively discussed (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1992; Basch *et al.*, 1994; Porter, 1999, Vertovec, 1999; 2004). It has been recoingnized that immigrants construct social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. By traveling back and forth, working and do business in distant places, migrants and their families are pursuing cross-border livelihoods. Cross-border ties are extended to trans-generational ties with the increasing involvement of 'diaspora' groups to the sending communities such as remittances, cross-border business activities as well as investment (De Haas, 2005).

Rather contradicting each other, theories of labour migration in the existing literature are supplemented with new 'push' and 'pull' elements. Migration theories also investigate the issue in different contexts, from individual perspectives to broader structures of national and international economies. The purpose of this research paper is not to construct a new theory to explain the increasing trend in numbers of Vietnamese workers in Thailand. It rather attempts to provide more empirical evidence to help explore the existing theories. Since cross-border labour is a complex issue and one theory would not be sufficient to provide a satisfactory analytical framework, the paper adopts a multi-theoretical approach.

## Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

In history, Vietnamese migrations to Thailand can be divided into two periods. Warfare, religious and political persecutions were among the historical reasons forcing people to move, as highlighted by previous studies (Pool, 1970;

Jantawimol, 1998; Rattanaworameteekoon, 2007; Walsh, 2010). The first major wave of migration was in 1780 and was the result of defeat for Prince Nguyen Anh. Around 5,000 soldiers in his army took shelter in Bangkok, Thailand in subsequent years of the eighteenth century. Some of them returned afterwards but many remained in Thailand. These groups of Vietnamese are called *Yuon Kao* or Ancient Vietnamese by Thai people.

The escalation of the First Indochinese War led by the French in the 1940s pushed many Vietnamese out of the country. Up to 1946, a total of 46,700 people, mostly from the Northern part of Vietnam, fled to Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan soon after the French re-invaded Lao PDR and bombarded Thakhek. These Vietnamese refugees are referred to as *Yuon Op Pha Yop* in the Thai language. By 1975, the Vietnamese migrants in Thailand were recorded as 80,000 people.

Between 1975 and 1995, it was recorded that a large number of Vietnamese escaped the new government and fled to Thailand. However, they either later moved to a third country or were forced to return to Vietnam. By 1995, there were no further records of Vietnamese who came to Thailand after 1975. Data on the accurate number of *Yuon Kao* and *Yuon Op Pha Yop* in Thailand is also not available since some of them have still been unable to obtain official registration as much as 60 years after they first entered Thailand (Caouette *et al.*, 2005; Walsh, 2010).

Although *Yuon Kao* and *Yuon Op Pha Yop* are not the subject of this study, they do form valuable social networks that encourage the mobility of the younger generations of Vietnamese workers. Network theory, as mentioned earlier, indicates that social networks developed in host countries by earlier groups of migrants serve to facilitate increased labour mobility as they reduce the risks and socio-economic costs associated with migration by newcomers. This is especially true for Vietnamese migrant workers, whose cultural affinities and languages are different from the Thai people and this makes them heavily dependent on social networks. The relationship between the long-established Vietnamese communities in Thailand and the newly-arrived migrant workers will be elaborated further in later parts of this paper.

There are a few research studies in the existing literature with respect to the pattern and nature in the mobility of Vietnamese labourers in Thailand. The comparative lack of literature is probably the result of two issues. On the one hand, the scale of migration of this group to Thailand is smaller than those from Cambodia, Lao PDR and particularly Myanmar. On the other hand, it is because many Vietnamese workers in Thailand are currently working without a work permit

since no labour agreement has been signed between the two governments. Hence, nobody knows exactly the demographic characteristics of this population. Furthermore, given their illegal status, most of them refuse to participate in any research for fears that they would be exposed to the Thai police and authorities afterward. Current studies on Vietnamese migrant workers in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) are likely to focus on those in Lao PDR, Cambodia and Yunnan-China since there is a greater number of Vietnamese migrant workers in those countries than in Thailand (National Statistical Centre and National Economic Research Institute, 2005; CDRI, 2009; Caouette *et.al.*, 2005, IOM, 2010)

Among those studies in the literature is one done by Watchree Srikham (2012). By interviewing 50 Vietnamese workers in Ubon Rachathani, he analyzed push and pull factors contributing to workers' decisions to work in Thailand. Wage differences and family reunions act as push factors, while pull factors include better offers in jobs. For example, employment offers often come with accommodation, food and expenses concerning the employees' monthly border crossing. It is noted that since there is no labour agreement between Thailand and Vietnam, Vietnamese workers entering Thailand with a tourist visa of 30 days' stay have to leave the country through the Ubon Rachatani-Lao border and make a reentry at the end of every monthly cycle (Srikham, 2012). Srikham's study, however, only focused on the living and working conditions of Vietnamese workers in Ubon Rachathani and paid little attention to the poverty impact of migration remittances on the household and community of origin.

One of the direct results of labour migration is remittances. Authors in the school of the new economics of labour migration generally agree that the additional money generated through migration is vital to family livelihoods, especially to the rural poor (Stark, 1991; Taylor, 1996; Adams *et al.*, 2003; Berne, 2004; Aung Set, 2009). Remittances have a wide range of purposes: food consumption, housing improvement, means for better access to health and education services, and capital for investment in productive activity (Taylor, 1996). However, the role of remittances in the migration process of Vietnamese workers in Thailand remains undiscovered. Little is known about how that money is spent in the sending households and what motives there are for sending remittances.

In the early 1990s, inhabitants along the Mekong River, which was notorious for wars and conflicts in the past, witnessed a major change in the region. The six countries, Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces of the People's Republic of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam agreed to establish an economic zone known as the Greater Mekong Subregion. This was an initiative by

the Asian Development Bank (ADB) under the framework of the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation, aiming for greater regional integration and development. The GMS Economic Cooperation Program concentrates on nine areas of activities: transport, energy, telecommunications, tourism, human resource development, agriculture, environment, trade and investment. Previous studies discovered that the flow of regional migration has been increasing as a result of the GMS Cooperation Program (ADB, 2013; King, 2012; Caouette *et al.*, 2005; Lewis *et al.*, 2010). However, those studies mostly focus on three migration patterns: the Chinese moving from Yunnan to Vietnam, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar; Vietnamese going up to Yunnan and crossing the border to Lao PDR and Cambodia, and migration into Thailand from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar. Although previous studies have noticed some Vietnamese workers crossing Lao PDR and Cambodia to Thailand, they do not offer further details on this type of labour mobility (Caouette *et al.*, 2005). Again, the link between the new momentum in regional integration and the increasing mobility of Vietnamese workers to Thailand remains unknown.

The main purpose of this research paper is to provide empirical evidence to labour migration studies so as to inform future policies on leveraging cross-border labour migration in the GMS for regional development. In particular, it attempts to shed light on the current flow of workers from Vietnam to Thailand by testing the three following hypotheses:

H1: The geographic interface supported by newly development initiatives at the regional scale is facilitating the growing mobility of Vietnamese workers moving to Thailand.

H2: Situational forces at both the sending and receiving countries (Vietnam-Thailand) are encouraging workers to migrate as a household livelihood strategy to change their social and economic status. Meanwhile, at a macro level, the labour mobility between the two countries helps ease the pressure on employment in Vietnam and the shortage of low-cost unskilled labourers in Thailand.

H3: The long-established Vietnamese communities in Thailand are offering jobs and other support to the newly arriving groups of Vietnamese workers.

Since no statistical data on the demographic characteristics of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand exist and it is difficult to approach these groups due to their illegal status, this study employs a scientific literature analysis method. Information from local newspapers in the Vietnamese language as well as relevant

publications will be grouped, systematized, summarized and analyzed in order to achieve the objective of the study. The number of Vietnamese migrant workers stated elsewhere in the paper is an estimate of the total people registered at checkpoints as tourists. Informants are also kept anonymous. The following parts of this research paper will comprise the testing of the three proposed hypotheses. The conclusion will summarise the research results and discuss implications for future policies to leverage cross-border labour migration for regional development.

### **Vietnamese Workers amidst Changes in Regional Landscapes**

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Southeast Asia has entered a new chapter of its development-with further liberalization of flows of capital, trade, goods and people. In January 1992 in Singapore, the six members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand agreed to set up a free trade zone. Vietnam joined in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999 (ASEAN website).

In the same year, the six governments in the GMS agreed to set up an economic zone within the framework of the Greater-Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation program initiated by ADB (ADB-GMS website). The GMS Economic Cooperation has a distinct feature. For the first time, the ADB was able to pull together the six countries that have different history, languages and cultures to work towards the same agenda. Those nations also have a long history of wars with outsiders from other regions and with each other within the region. Levels of development among the participating nations greatly vary. In 1992, when the ADB inaugurated the cooperation program, Thailand had the highest GDP (Purchasing Power Parity method) with US\$203 billion, followed by Vietnam (US\$52 billion), Myanmar (US\$10.9 billion), Cambodia (US\$5.8 billion) and then Lao PDR (US\$3.4 billion). While China in 1992 reached US\$1.2 trillion in GDP, Yunnan only achieved US\$102 billion and Guangxi had US\$32 billion (CIA World Factbook). Lao PDR, Cambodia and Myanmar are classified as 'least developed countries' and Myanmar has only just recently opened its doors to the outside world. Vietnam faced three decades of war which severely constrained its capacity for economic development. Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous of China benefit little from the national economic reforms, which are concentrated in the prosperous coastal areas in the southern parts of China. Taking a different approach than central economic planning, Thailand has followed free market principles in its pattern of economic development and the country is defined as middle-income (Krongkaew, 2004). The



ADB believes that, by linking less developed economies with more dynamic ones, the markets of the participating counties will be integrated and harmonized. This will strengthen their joint competitive position as a trading bloc in the global economy, while increasing regional stability and energetic security (Peerapeng *et al.*, 2012).

The creation of an extensive infrastructural system has put an end a long period of isolation for the GMS countries. For the first time, the isolated economies of Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam are connected. Borders are opened to allow circulation of goods and investments in the region and beyond. The development of transport infrastructure, the easing of visa requirements and the creation of daily and weekly border passes have generated a massive increase in mobility (ADB, 2013). The ADB has committed itself to ‘the free flow of people’ as a goal of regional integration. It aims at ‘allowing for goods and people to travel freely around the GMS without significant impediment, excessive cost or delay’ (ADB, 2005). As result of such an effort, cross-border movement of labour over the GMS has been so dynamic that there is no sub-regional governance system or convention to ease it (Peerapeng *et al.*, 2012). Among the six countries, Thailand is the main receiving destination for migrants in the GMS, hosting around 2-4 million migrants (Huguet *et al.*, 2012). Many of those migrants are unskilled and undocumented workers (Caouette *et al.*, 2005). No systematic data are available on the numbers of irregular migrants crossing borders but it is generally accepted that infrastructural development has facilitated their in-country travel, making it easier for them to reach both official and unofficial entry points (Caouette *et al.*, 2005).

Vietnamese workers also join this unprecedented flow of people across borders into Thailand. They travel along different routes, usually starting in their home communities, stopping at various places on the way in Lao PDR or Cambodia before reaching the borders and entering Thailand. Often they use the following land routes:

- (i) Lao Bao–Dansavanna-Mukdahan
- (ii) Quang Binh–Khammouane-Nakhon Phanom
- (iii) Ha Tinh -[Bolikhamxai](#)-Vientaine -Nong Khai
- (iv) Nghe An–Xiengkhuang-Vientaine-Nong Khai
- (v) Ho Chi Minh–Phnom Penh-Bangkok
- (vi) Quy Nhon-Stung Treng–Siem Reap-Bangkok
- (vii) Ha Tien-Kampot-Bangkok



**Figure 1: Labour Flows in the GMS**

As discussed earlier, the quality of infrastructure in these routes has been considerably improved as part of the transportation development projects funded by the ADB and other donors, thus making the journey much easier. There is a story circulating around that travelers now can enjoy their meals in three countries: breakfast in Vietnam, lunch in Lao PDR/Cambodia and dinner in Thailand.

It has been recently noticed that thousands of people come to apply for passports at immigration offices in Quang Binh, Ha Tinh and Nghe An after the Lunar new year holiday in Vietnam, which is between February and March. Among the small number of people needing passports for tourism purpose are workers who are employed either in Lao PDR or Thailand. An average of 1,000 people visit those offices every day during this period, often causing traffic problems (Nguyen Khoa, 2013). Similarly, the number of people passing the Cau Treo border checkpoint in Ha Tinh province also increases considerably at the period just after the Lunar new year. Immigration staff have to work around the clock and to open more counters to meet the demand of passengers (VietHa, 2011).

At Ban Laem, the check point between Cambodia and Thailand, about 400km from Bangkok, approximately 300 Vietnamese enter Thailand via Ban Laem every day, according to a Thai immigration officer. Most of them are women. They enter Thailand with a tourist visa for 30 days and work at restaurants and fruit retail establishments. Once the visa runs out, they return to Ban Laem to obtain a new one. Usually, they will wake up around 3am-4am, take the 800 Thai baht bus (US\$27), get a new visa at 8 am and then come back Bangkok for the evening working shift (RFA Vietnamese, 2012).

According to Vietnamese migrant workers, Thailand is now more preferable than traditional markets such as South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Saudi Arabia. Those markets no long appear attractive, since workers are not able to earn desired income. Thailand is closer to home as they can cross the River Mekong and enter Thailand after a half day on a bus passing through Lao PDR/Cambodia. No complicated procedures or airfares are needed and, in many cases, labour brokers are no longer required (Nguyen Khoa, 2013; VietHa, 2011). In rare cases, workers pay between US\$100-150 to brokers and for them it is much cheaper than paying US\$5,000 for going to other countries such as Malaysia or Angola (HaTinhOnline, 2013). This trend is an evitable result of vigorous efforts to extend a GMS infrastructural system and to enhance transportation in the sub-region by governments, the ADB and other relevant stakeholders.

### **Vietnam and Thailand in a Sending–Receiving Relationship**

Population mobility from Vietnam to Thailand in particular is not a new phenomenon for both Vietnam and Thailand. The first Vietnamese being seen in Siam (the previous name for Thailand) can date back at least the time of the establishment of the Sukhothai state in the C13<sup>th</sup> (Thin, 2003). However, the nature and size of this mobility is now very different from the past. Previously, the Vietnamese movements to Thailand occurred primarily as part of the expansion frontiers, with resettlement of populations defeated during warfare, or religious and political conflicts forced people to seek refuge in the relatively stable environment of Thailand. The Vietnamese labor mobility today, however, is increasingly shifting from political to economic motivation.

As early as 1980, Vietnam has viewed labour exports as part of official government policy. Prime Minister Phan Van Khai once stressed that "exporting labour is a very important and major strategy because it helps solve the unemployment problem, increase foreign exchange for the country.... We must

consider labor export as an important and long-term strategy". Acting as a 'labour brokerage state', the Vietnamese government has actively involved in recruiting and sending hundreds of thousands of workers to over 40 countries; topping the list are Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and nations of the Middle East (Tran, 2011).

Unemployment and underemployment are always issues in Vietnam, especially now the global economy has not shown any vigorous recovery yet. The GDP growth rate has been low for three years in a row 6.2 % in 2011, 5.2% in 2012, 5.43% in 2013. The inflation rate has maintained at 7.33% on average since 1996 (World Bank). In Vietnam where the economy mainly depends on export, the impact of the global economic crisis seems to have hit the labor market across the country, leading to persistence in the number of jobless persons and job deficiency (Table 1). In the context of stagnant production, to partly keep the production capital and reduce loss, many enterprises have to either lay-off their workers or reduce working hours. More seriously, many businesses stopped their operation. In 2011, 79,014 out of 622,977 enterprises shut down, followed by another 55,000 claimed bankrupt in 2012 (Cam, 2012) As a consequence, many people lose their jobs and/or seek employment in informal sector. The unofficial employment rate has increased from nearly 36 percent in 2011 to 37 percent in 2012. More than 77 percent laborers are self employed such as motorbike taxi drivers and street vendors without labor contracts and low monthly income (Duong Loan, 2013).

With a large proportion of the labor force residing in rural area (approximately 80% of the total population) and the stagnant production in factories in urban area, Vietnam is exposed to two serious issues. Whereas unemployment is mainly an urban phenomenon, under-employment is higher in rural areas (Table 1). With approximately 1.5 million people joining the national labor force every year and official transactions of labor market meet only 15-20% of demand of people looking for jobs (Nguyen, 2012), the tremendous pressure on employment is clearly felt. In the absence of viable livelihood options and amidst a severe competition in the domestic labour market, cross-border migration is seen as the family's response to the deep economic recession. For the Vietnamese government, actively exporting labor serves multiple purposes: easing domestic under- and unemployment, and increasing the inflow of hard-currency remittances and national revenue.

A regional economic integration set in motion by ADB and other donors has created a new economic space for cross-border trade, investment and exchanges of natural resources, goods and products. In this newly created space, as Aung Set

(2009) argues, the rural poor, as key actors in the Mekong, are negotiating their way to secure their share of development. Cross-border labor migration is viewed as part of this negotiation (Aung Set, 2009). Vietnamese labors from the rural parts of the country, from this perspective, are not exceptional in the emerging livelihood space.

**Table 1-Vietnam Labour Snapshot-2009-2012**

	2009	2010	2011	2012
Population ( <i>thousands</i> )	86,024	86,927	87,840	88,772
Labor force ( <i>thousands</i> )	49,322	50,393	51,398	52,581
<i>By age group</i>				
- 15 - 24	9,184	9,245	8,465	7,962
- 25 - 49	30,255	30,939	31,503	32,037
- 50+	1,852	1,0205	1,1429	12,580
<i>By residence</i>				
- Urban	13,272	14,106	15,252	16,038
- Rural	36,050	36,286	36,146	36,543
Unemployment (%)	4.60	4.50	4.50	4.50
- Urban	4.60	4.29	3.60	3.21
- Rural	2.25	2.30	1.60	1.59
Underemployment (%)	5.61	3.57	2.96	2.74
- Urban	3.33	1.82	1.58	1.56
- Rural	6.51	4.26	3.56	3.27

Source: GSO, 2009-2012

Data on ‘out-migration’ rate by the Vietnam General Statistic Officer (GSO) reveal the high percentage of migrants among the population in provinces which are part of the economic corridors development by ADB (Figure 1). For example, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh in Eastern Corridor; Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue in East-West Corridor; Binh Dinh, Lam Dong in Southern Corridor; Ben Tre, An Giang, Hau Giang, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu in Southern Coastal Corridor (Table 2). The locals report that they named *Thai Village* (*Làng đi Thái*, in Vietnamese language) for those communities have a large number of people working in Thailand (Le Thuong, 2013). In the case of Ha Tinh – a less-developed province in the Eastern Corridor, near the Cau Treo border check-point, an

estimate of 10,000 people are working in Thailand (accounting 1% of the province's population in 2012). Typically, in Song Tien village, Ha Tinh province, 84% of households have a member working in Thailand (109/130 households). In some extreme cases, it notices that the whole family of 5 members travel back and forth between Vietnam and Thailand for work (HaTinhOnline, 2013).

**Table 2: Out-migration rate by province (%) - 2007-2012**

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
<b>Eastern Corridor</b>						
Thanh Hoa	8.8	7.6	14.9	13.0	14.5	10.3
Nghe An	5.7	4.5	11.4	10.3	11.8	10.5
Ha Tinh	10.6	6.4	15.2	14.4	12.4	12.8
<b>East-West Corridor</b>						
Quang Binh	5.7	6.9	11.5	13.4	10.3	7.6
Quang Tri	11.5	3.6	10.2	11.4	10.0	8.4
TT-Hue	7.5	8.8	9.9	10.3	8.6	7.7
<b>Southern Corridor</b>						
Binh Dinh	7.5	4.3	10.8	9.9	10.0	9.8
Lam Dong	4.5	12.3	8.4	7.5	8.3	8.9
<b>Southern Coastal Corridor</b>						
Ben Tre	10.1	7.3	15.7	15.1	15.5	10.8
An Giang	4.6	5.0	11.0	11.9	16.0	11.2
Hau Giang	12.6	10.4	10.8	10.9	5.4	11.6
Soc Trang	8.4	4.2	11.4	12.7	14.8	10.2
Bac Lieu	6.6	3.1	10.8	13.2	9.6	10.7

Source: GSO 2007-2012

As one of the participating countries in the GMS Economic Cooperation Program, Vietnam has been active in implementing various measures to facilitate cross-border trade, investment and mobility. In a recent interview with custom staff in Vietnam, Lao DPR, Cambodia and Thailand, there is a mutual agreement that the Vietnamese custom system is quite advanced, compared to that in its neighboring countries (Interview by the author). The country has been implementing single-window administration and e-custom at border checkpoints, such as Lao Bao, Cau Treo (between Vietnam and Lao PDR) and Xa-Mat (between Vietnam and Cambodia). However, the issue on cross-border migration management is still far from legalization. Although recently, the Vietnam Labor

Minister has revealed a request for more employment in Thailand (Royal Thai Government), the two countries have not spelled out any terms and conditions for a labor cooperation agreement. The lack of agreement has exposed thousands of Vietnamese migrant workers to vulnerable and illegal status, thus also reducing the positive impacts brought by cross-border migration on the economic wellbeing of many families in poor communities of Vietnam. Often they lose their bargaining power and end up being forced to work with lower payment. In some cases, in order to keep their employment with a tourist visa, often Vietnamese workers have to pay a monthly fee of 500 Thai baht (~US\$ 15; exchange rate US\$ 1 ~ 30 Thai Baht) to the Thai Police, which is called *191 fee* (191 is also the call number for Thai Police). They are then granted with a receipt, which they can show to the police whenever being asked (RFAVietnamese, 2012).

Unlike Vietnam, Thailand is presenting a number of ‘pull’ factors regarding wage and employment opportunities that consequently induce migration into Thailand. With a GDP worth of US\$662 billion (on a purchasing power parity basis), Thailand is classified as the 2nd largest economy in Southeast Asia, after Indonesia. It is also the 4th richest nation according to GDP per capita, after Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia (CIA Word Fact Book). As an emerging economy depending heavily on export, Thailand has the most diversified and advanced industrial base in the GMS. Major exports concentrate on sectors of textile and footwear, fishery and fishing processing, rubber, jewelry, cars, computers and electrical appliances, where young and low-cost labor are extremely needed. The increasing demand in the manufacturing sector presents huge opportunities for employment. However the dramatic changes in its demography in the past few decades has exposed Thailand to a shortage of labor, particularly in certain low-skill sectors of agriculture, fishery and construction.

The population in Thailand rapidly increased until about 1970. However, as time passes, fertility rates decline, the young-age cohorts get smaller. The average annual growth rate of the population in Thailand is now only 0.52% compared to 1.03% in Vietnam. Thailand’s percentage of youth population (15-24 age) is about 15.1% while it is 18.4% in Vietnam, Myanmar (18.6%), Cambodia (21.2%) and Lao PDR (21.3%) (CIA World Factbook). This implies that the number of Thai newly entering the national labor force is declining. As the new economic space has just been created by newly developed infrastructure in the sub-region, Vietnamese workers have quickly moved in to meet such a demand of labors. The shortage of low-skilled labour also create a disparity in wage levels between Thailand and its

neighbors in similar economic sectors, thus giving way to the rise of employment of foreign workers who are willing to enter this segment of the labor market.

Despite efforts by the Vietnamese government in poverty reduction and economic development, the large proportion of the population in the rural parts of the country still do not have equal and full access to necessary basic services, especially, education and vocational trainings. The number of trained workers accounts only 25.3% in urban areas and 8% in rural areas (Nguyen, 2012). For those who have low or poor-quality education and from underdeveloped parts of Vietnam, seeking employment in Thailand, where low-skilled labors highly required, seems to be a better livelihood strategy.

Lewis et. al. (2010) highlights that as Thailand become wealthier, consumption demand increases in line with the rise in wage levels, leading to a greater demand for goods and services, and thus a need for more labor (Lewis et al., 2010). With a strong economic growth of between 4-7% since 2000 accompanied with GDP per capital of an average of US\$ 3,019 (in the period between 2006 and 2012, 4 times higher than Vietnam) (CIA World Factbook), Thailand is clearly more advanced than Vietnam. The better income and better services also generate better education for most Thai youth, who consequently later move to occupy the secured and well-paid segments of the national labor market. Hence, the low-skill and low-pay sectors are left open to migrant workers from neighboring countries such as Vietnam, from where unemployment and underemployment chronically remain high. Such a case in Thailand has presented a vivid example for the theory of dual and segmented labour markets, first described by M. J. Piore (1979) in his influential book *Birds of Passage*.

The Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok provides an estimate of 40,000-50,000 Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand (RFA Vietnamese, 2012) whereas Lewis et al. (2010) used data the consensus forecast survey in 2009 and predicted a number of 28,000 of them currently working in Thailand (Lewis et al., 2010). Despite the gaps in statistics, almost all Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand share similar demographic profiles and migration motivations. They come from the poor rural of Vietnam, where farming activities do not generate enough income for a family of an average of 4-5 members while options for domestic off-farm employment are absent (Vietnamese still share in an extended family, where grandparents live with a couple who have two children). There is a case of a worker after 15 years of domestic migration without any decent earnings now cross border to Thailand for work as to him Thailand offers better employment opportunities (Huu Anh, 2012). Another case reported that if a husband and wife worked



together, they could save at least US\$ 250 a month, far better than domestic migration (Huong Huyen, 2013).

Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand are around 18 to 50 years of age and many of them are women (RFAVietnamese, 2012). In My Loc commune, Ha Tinh province, for example, among 1,200 people working in Thailand, approximately 500 of them are women. According to the chairlady of the commune women union, this number might be higher since many of them do not report when they go out. Most of the migrant workers just finish primary or secondary school and have no specific skills before entering Thailand. In some typical cases, some women even hold a bachelor degree (HaTinhOnline, 2013). Mr. H who is working in a garment workshop in Suthipon-Khwan Wattana, Din Deng, Bangkok, shared that as a pure farmer, it took him 6 months to master a skill of sewing a pants on the sewing machine (Minh Quang, 2012). Often they will receive a higher pay once they become accustomed to their duties (Srikham, 2012).

It has noticed a labour division by sex among Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. Male workers are often found to work in construction sector, parking lots or run street vendors. Meanwhile, females work as nanny or sales in street clothes/food stalls, waitress or wash dishing in restaurants, janitorial work in shops and schools (RFAVietnamese, 2012). Young and good looking females are recruited to work in restaurants and bars (Gia Minh, 2010). In some cases, both sexes are seen to work in the same business entities run by *Yuon Kao* and *Yuon Op Pha Yop* (Bui, 2012). Some Vietnamese who have worked in Thailand longer (5-10 years) even work as tour guides for Vietnamese tourists, in which they can earn between 5,000 and 7,000 Thai bath (US\$ 166-233) each tour (Huong Huyen, 2013). In Bangkok, specifically, it is estimated 66% of Vietnamese laborers working in garment workshops (Gia Minh, 2010).

Vietnamese workers fall into three employment categories: full-time, part-time and self-employed. Full-time workers are employed on a monthly basis by a single employer, often *Yuon Kao* and *Yuon Op Pha Yop*. They stay together with their employers or they are provided with housing nearby (Srikham, 2012; Bui, 2012; Gia Minh, 2010). This offer of free accommodation is more likely given in provinces, other than Bangkok. For some migrant workers, relatively good and free accommodation are much better than what they could find if they were to work in big cities of Vietnam such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh (Le, 2011). The other group is part-time workers who run different shifts with different employers. For example, Mrs P.T.T works for two employers. From 8pm-3am, she is hired to work for a clothes stall opposite Patpong, Bangkok. She starts in another food shop as a

waitress from 6am-3am (RFAVietnamese, 2012). Some laborers are luckier, who have stayed longer in Thailand, thus they manage to own small street food/fruit vendors near tourist places or they own food stalls at big markets outskirts of Bangkok (Huong Huyen, 2013).

Migration income varies upon the type of employment, ranging from 300-650 Thai bath per day (US\$ 1-2.16). A migrant worker can earn a monthly average income of 15,000 Thai bath (US\$ 500). Such an income is a fortune to many poor in rural areas of Vietnam. According to the GSO data, as of July 2012, an average of wage in state sector is US\$ 223. Those who work informal sectors such as housemaid, at best, can earn a monthly amount of US\$ 140 whereas workers in factories and young graduates are paid with US\$ 150 (GSO, 2012). This explains why some young females who hold a bachelor degree leave home and cross border to seek employment in Thailand.

Looking the issue from this angle, the labor mobility from Vietnam to Thailand present a win-win solution both at micro and macro levels of both countries. At the micro level, cross-border migration has become a viable option for household income diversification. At macro level, for the Vietnamese government, Thailand with higher incomes and wage levels in a growing demand for low-skilled labor help ease the tremendous pressure on employment in Vietnam. The willing of Vietnamese migrant workers to participate in a secondary labor market of low-skill, low-wage, insecure and generally unpleasant jobs in factories and the service sector helps reduce labor shortage in unskilled sector. A manager from one construction site shared that many Thais now refused to work in the labor intensive or polluting sectors such as construction and refused to work with the payment of 300 Thai baht (US\$10). Thai workers request at least 500 Thai bath (US\$15) (RFAVietnamese, 2012; Minh Quang, 2013). Research by the Thailand Development Research Institute estimated that the removal of all foreign migrant workers in Thailand would lead to a decline of around 0.5% of GDP per year (Aung Set, 2009). Studies elsewhere also confirm that undocumented migrants are fundamental to the economies of many states. In the United States, for instance, some 10 million undocumented migrants account for nearly 10 percent of the low-wage labor force. International remittances from migrants produce gigantic domestic incomes, while relieving the unemployment rates by decreasing domestic labor supply (Cameron and Edward, 2008).

The direct outcome of labor migration is savings that will be later sent back to families back home. The annual flows of remittances to the sending countries have turned labor migration into a practical strategy for poverty reduction and

development. Remittances have been acting as a rather attractive ‘pull’ factor to many migrants, particularly to those from poor areas of Vietnam. Respondents revealed that they accept all sorts of conditions (retained passports, deception about wages, physical restriction, inferior working conditions and also threats of being reported to the authorities) since they can save and send home from US\$350 to 500 per month. In an extreme case, a husband works at a garment workshop while a wife is hired as a waitress, they can send home US\$ 1,250 every month (HaTinhOnline, 2013). For those who work in provinces other than Bangkok are able to save more, despite they earn less, since chances for spending money in small provinces are minimum (Le, 2011).

Remittances serve multiple purposes: household consumption, medical bills as well as tuition fees for children. For Mrs. L. working at one of the food stalls at a night market in Bangkok, farming back home does not provide with enough income to cover tuition fees of her two children, hence migration presents a practical solution to her. Typically, some households use remittances to upgrade their houses to a concrete type with 2-3 floors which is equipped with fancy facilities (HaTinhOnline, 2013; Le Thuong, 2013). Being heavily influenced by Confucianism, in which social status is measured by age, knowledge and wealth, it is important, sometimes excessively, for Vietnamese to have high education, good source of income and fancy house with fancy facilities. Similar to Thais, Vietnamese work hard to preserve ‘their faces’. In this light, migration does not only improve the household economic position with better food, provide access to better medical services and education but also social status. While more durable and safer house provides a sense of security, one of the most basic needs after food for immediate consumption, affording a fancy house with fancy facilities generates feelings to be more honorable, a sense of pride, in the origin communities of migrants, hence leading to self-confidence and empowerment. These improvements have inspired other families to also make their journey to Thailand (HaTinhOnline, 2013). Some of them even go with a hope of saving enough money to return home and open business by their own (Minh Quang, 2013).

### **Diaspora Communities and Vietnamese Migrant Workers**

Together with material and human capital, social capital is a valuable migration resource in enabling and inspiring people to migrate (de Haas, 2008). Authors of the network migration argued that networks connecting migrants, formal migrants, non-migrants in origin and destination places would assist in

sustaining the migration process (Massey et al., 1989). Although Vietnamese and Thais might look similar, as Western foreign tourists often remark, they do not share similar culture, traditions and beliefs. While nearly 95% of the Thai population are Buddhists of the Theravada school of Buddhism, many Vietnamese are influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism belonging to the Mahayana school. The Thai language heavily borrows from Pali, Sanskrit and Old Khmer whereas Vietnamese vocabularies have their origins in Chinese, in a form of a Latin alphabet with additional diacritics for tones, and certain letters. Cultural and language differences together with a relatively geographical distance, as a consequence, have posed numerous difficulties to those who attempt to cross-border and enter Thailand. In this light, networks with diasporas communities, Thai people of Vietnamese descent or *Yuan Kao* and *Yuan Op Pha Yop*, have become, at best, significant assistance to newly arrived Vietnamese.

*Yuan Kao* and *Yuan Op Pha Yop* who have become Thai citizens and successful businessmen that run business entities where laborers are needed. They recruit Vietnamese from their origin communities, in some cases, pay for food, housing, on-the-job training as well as expenses for visa-run at the end of 30 days of the workers' tourist visa. The mutual nationalistic sympathy shared by the employers and workers is, in many cases, the main reason for offering employment (Srikham, 2012). "*I am pleased with the working ethnics of Vietnamese, therefore I always hire them*" is among positive comments on Vietnamese workers, shared among employers (Minh Quang, 2013).

In addition, the strong social networks with Vietnamese diasporas means no labor brokers are required (Srikham, 2012). Networks also become helpful in emergency situations. For example, Vietnamese Thai employers would help bail out those workers who are arrested given their illegal status (Le, 2011). Formal migrants and newcomers often gather in order to share information on employment and religion. In Bangkok, Vietnamese would meet at a temple in the Chinatown area (Walsh, 2011), or Catholic Churches in Sathorn and Din Deng areas (Le, 2011). Similarly, there are also social and religious organizations set up by *Yuan Kao* and *Yuan Op Pha Yop* in provinces such as Ubon Rachathani, Nakhom Phanom, Mukdhan, Khon Kaen, Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Nong Bua Lamphu, etc (Le, 2011; Gia Minh, 2010).

Aung Set (2009) argues that while the conventional formal trade agreements tend to benefit big investors, and traders, social networks are essentially important for regional development in its unique way. On the one hand, the "international network" that the community has established in the host

community over time serves as capital for future migrants by reducing fees for migration and the risks in the host country, thereby increasing income, savings and remittances. On the other hand, more importantly for regional integration, this established link opens a window of opportunity for future economic and social exchanges, such to facilitate trade, and small and medium sized informal businesses (Aung Set, 2009). The relationship between *Yuon Kao*, *Yuon Op Pha Yop* and younger generations of Vietnamese also reflects such visions of future. It has observed that Vietnamese migrant workers often ride back with new ones on their return trip from the holiday (Srikham, 2012; VietHa, 2011). One would also easily run to businessmen with original Vietnamese identity in Ho Chi Minh or Hanoi who dress like Thais but speak Vietnamese language with Thai accents.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Leveraging Migration for Development**

The empirical analysis by far has agreed with the three proposed hypotheses: (H1) Changes in regional landscapes brought by ASEAN FTA and specifically, ADB GMS Economic Cooperation program are facilitating and instigating growing flows of Vietnamese workers into Thailand. The rapid improvements in road, rail and checkpoint facilities, in combination with the easing of land travel are making Thailand a relatively cheaper employment destination, for many Vietnamese migrants, compared to other traditional markets of South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, and South Arabia; (H2) Contextual forces between Vietnam-as a sending country and Thailand-as a receiving country, affect labor flows from Vietnam into Thailand in various significant ways. In the absence of viable livelihood alternatives caused by the chronically high rate of unemployment and underemployment, particularly in poor areas of rural in Vietnam, cross-border migration appears a practical solution for households to diversify income sources and obtain income insurance amidst the global economic recession. At macro level, the willing of Vietnamese workers to participate in some certain low-wage, unskilled sectors help reduce the shortage of labors in Thailand. Meanwhile, for the Vietnamese government, this mobility also eases the immense pressure to create sufficient and decent jobs for the large proportion of its young population entering the national labor force every year; (3) the long established communities of Vietnamese in Thailand are providing significant supports to newly arrived Vietnamese workers, from job offers, accommodation to legal and spiritual assistance. Such social networks are important for migrant workers in future

mobility whereas they cement crucial foundations for social, cultural and economic exchanges within the Sub-region and beyond.

The investigation on the increasing trend in movement of workers from Vietnam into Thailand has also constructed new knowledge aiding in the confirmation of numerous theories of migration. The availability of employment and wage opportunities in Thailand and Vietnam that initiates cross-labor migration reflects the neo-classical economics theory. The dual and segmented labor market theory can find its footprints in the current situation of labor market of Thailand while the networks theory offer a framework to discover the relationship between *Yuan Kao* and *Yuan Op Pha Yop* and Vietnamese migrant workers. Migration motivation and use of remittances are perfect examples for the decision making theory and the new economics of labor migration theory.

Impacts brought by migration, both negative and positive, have long been an on-going debate in migration studies and on economic development agendas. While this paper does not attempt to ignore vulnerable situations of Vietnamese migrant workers due to their illegal status, as widely reported by other authors, it argues that negative impacts can be well managed and that the economic significance of cross-border migration to households and national economy of both Thailand and Vietnam is undeniable. Although not being legally recognized, Vietnamese workers keep flowing into Thailand mostly voluntary and it results from regional integration processes and market liberalization.

For this reason, in order to open new channels for development in the Subregion and to make labor flow as freely as goods, services and capital, it requires feasible strategies with more proactive approaches toward labor mobility from Vietnam to Thailand. The two governments first and foremost must push forward the discussion and signing of labor cooperation agreement. A signing of memorandum of understanding should be proceeded so that illegal workers can obtain legal documents. Vietnam and Thailand also have to work together on policies to support Vietnamese workers before departure, while working in Thailand and once they return.

Vocational trainings, language and life skills should be provided to workers prior to their departure so that they are able negotiate and communicate with Thai employers on terms of employment and related issues. Legal counseling, work safety, workers' rights, job opportunities and accessibility to medical services should be available to migrant workers while they are working in Thailand. This aims to ensure all forms of exploitation and abusive practice towards Vietnamese migrant workers to be eliminated. Last but not least, the Vietnamese government

should strengthen policies of the return migration and reintegration of migrant workers. A favorable business and investment environment in which remittances can be utilized to produce further profits should be fostered. In this way, migration can make its contribution into poverty reduction and economic development.

In order to formulate more comprehensive and feasible strategies, policy makers require a good stock of data and empirical evidence. In this light, further studies on various aspects towards labor mobility between Thailand and Vietnam are urgently needed. Sharing similar views with John Walsh (2011), the paper proposes further investigations on continuing economic connections between *Yuon Kao* and *Yuon Op Pha Yop* with their origin communities. It is also significant to gain further knowledge on returned migrants, that how they use new skills and knowledge acquired during their migration for community development and entrepreneurship promotion at local level.

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