

Migrant workers in seven destinations: perspectives from East and Southeast region

Asia produces the largest volume of international migrants, about 60% of the world migrant population. It represented 41% of the world migrant population. Based on 2017 UN estimation, a large proportion of Asian migrants, about 60%, move within the Asian region. In actual numbers, about 63 million migrants moved within Asia, while migration within Europe, the second largest regional migration flow, was about 41 million ([United Nations et al., 2017](#)).

Given the cultural and social diversity among Asian countries, we focus on East and Southeast Asia in this special issue. One of the major characteristics of international migration in East and Southeast Asia is labor migration. According to the estimation of the International Labor Organization, 20.4% of all migrant workers in the world are found in the region of Asia. Women migrant labors from East Asia were estimated to be 4% of all female migrant labor in 2017. In addition, women migrant labor from and Southeast Asia and the Pacific was 7.6% of all female migrant labor of that year ([International Labour Organization 2018](#)). In specific jobs, such as migrant domestic workers, the demand for females is overwhelmingly. Subsequently, in the literature on international migration in East and Southeast Asia, most studies focus on labor migration and female domestic workers.

Most studies of migration in East and Southeast Asia have addressed the causes and consequences of migration in the region. One of the causes commonly mentioned is economic motivation. Some studies suggest that discrepancies in economic development influence migration from one country to another. The major evidence to support this argument is that migration usually flows from less developed countries to more developed countries.

There is another line of research that demonstrates the importance of government policies. Some countries have policies that encourage people to move elsewhere to work and send back remittance, which contributes to the development of the home country. Most of this research focuses on the Philippines and Indonesia, which are major sending countries of migrant workers. Their governments control and support the migration industry, which helps match migrant workers with potential employers in various places and provides basic professional training. However, the government policies restrict the duration of stay of migrant workers at their destination with little room to change the arrangements.

Various studies of the consequences of migration in East and Southeast Asia have explored the economic benefits for the sending and receiving countries. Some studies suggest that an increase in labor migrants does not affect local workers, and it helps the local economy. Some studies suggest otherwise. However, few studies have explored the adaptation of migrants in East and Southeast Asia, as most migrants are migrant workers, and so their duration of stay is limited by their contracts and their interaction with local people is largely confined to their workplace.

Our special issue

In this special issue, authors discuss migrant workers in mainland China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand, all of which are countries in East and Southeast Asia that send or receive migrant workers. Each paper addresses some of the following issues: causes of labor migration, the socioeconomic and demographic



backgrounds of migrant workers, issues facing migrant workers and public response to migrant workers. Together, they provide a comparative and more comprehensive perspective for understanding migrant workers in East and Southeast Asia.

Yang and Qu addressed labor migration in mainland China from rural to urban areas, one of the largest migration flows in recent world history. They suggested that the migration was triggered by economic opportunities that emerged as cities began to develop. The program was initiated with the government relaxed its policies for allowing rural hukou population to move to the city. Yang and Qu observed that the economic standing of rural migrant workers has improved over the years as they work in the city, although they still earn less than local residents and facing challenges to secure community resources. As other studies also suggest, the experiences of these migrants largely reflect their rural hukou status and discrimination against them in the city.

Lai and Li reviewed three groups of migrant workers (i.e. high-skilled talented immigrants from developed countries, low-skilled migrant workers from less developed areas and migrants from mainland China) in Hong Kong, a global city. They discovered that the earning patterns of migrant workers in Hong Kong were similar to those found in other global cities. The integration of such migrants is bifurcated. High-skilled workers are well rewarded, while the human capital of low-skilled migrant workers from less developed areas is devalued. As well, there continues to be a racial hierarchy such that Whites still enjoy privilege in the Hong Kong labor market.

Arisman and Jaya focused on Indonesian migrant workers in Johor Bahru. They conducted a survey in Johor, Malaysia, and found that most Indonesian migrant workers have only high school education. They work long hours; some do not have a weekly day off; their travel documents are retained by their employers. The researchers concluded that the working environment for migrant workers is still challenging.

Hosogaya discussed labor migration in Japan, a topic not often addressed in the literature. She suggested that labor migration to Japan, as to other labor migration receiving countries, is related to economic disparity. Labor migration to Japan started in the early 1990s during the bubble economy and as a response to the aging population in Japan. Many migrant workers are treated as nonqualified workers or trainees, not as regular members of the labor market, and so their rights are not guaranteed. Hosogaya's discussion provides a valuable picture of recent migrant workers in Japan.

Opiniano explored labor migration in the Philippines, one of the major labor migration sending countries. The labor migration flow from the Philippines is well managed by the government. The remittance from labor migrants, largely female, has made substantial contribution to the economic development of the country. However, Opiniano suggested that labor migration from the Philippines in the future should better prepare migrants and their families for dealing with potential social cost and to encourage more investment from overseas remittance.

Deng, Wahyuni and Yulianto explored labor migration from Southeast Asia to Taiwan. They suggested that it is related largely to labor shortage. They suggested that labor migration is largely initiated and supported by the state. The government of Taiwan began to facilitate labor migration in 1989. Most labor migrants to Taiwan are from Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand. The migration flow reflects the economic gap between Taiwan and these countries. Migrant workers are vulnerable in the Taiwan labor market. This discrepancy reflects the transnationalization of social inequality.

Finally, Bhula-or discussed labor migration in Thailand from the perspective of sustainable development. She suggested that internal migration helps to reduce economic inequality because of remittances sent home. However, with a supply of low-skilled workers who are willing to take low wages, international migration reduces the incentive to upgrade facilities in the workplace, which in turn reduces the productivity of industries that hire a lot

of international migrants. The local population may believe that migrants cause safety issues and compete for public services. The study also discussed the implications of labor migration for environmental issues.

In short, all these papers present a common theme that the flow of migrant workers mainly reflects the economic differences between places. It is initiated and sustained by government policies. However, low-skilled migrant workers lack appropriate labor protection. They work in unfavorable environments. Many of these papers suggest that policies are needed to protect these vulnerable migrant workers in overseas locations. This set of papers also illustrates the importance of comparing experiences of migrant workers in different countries in East and Southeast Asia in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Future studies should collect comparable data in these countries to make direct comparison.

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References

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