

MOBILITY, IDENTITY AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF SKILLED BURMESE MIGRANT WORKERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN BANGKOK

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Abstract

The steady stream of skilled Burmese migrants flowing into Thailand started after the 1988 uprising. The first generation migrated to Thailand for better employment; and the second generation came along with their parents or came independently for better education and then became skilled workers. The majority of them have now (in the 2000s) attained at least Master's degrees and work in teaching institutions, engineering industries, and IT (Information Technology) companies. Many well-experienced Burmese professionals have played an important role in the development of the international programs of private educational institutions in Bangkok during the 1990s. Although they have been contributing towards the Thai society and economy for more than a decade or so, they are not willing to make the effort of integration into Thai society. The largest portion of their earnings flowed into the economy of Thailand because of an inefficient banking system, economic instability, and the unpredictable political situation in Burma which led to irregular or limited remittances for investment in Burmese businesses. However, the 2010 by-election and unprecedented developments in politics and the economy in Burma have started to change the future plan of Burmese skilled migrants.

บทคัดย่อ

การอพยพแรงงานฝีมือจากพม่าเข้าสู่ประเทศไทยเริ่มขึ้นหลังจากการประท้วงทางการเมืองในพม่าเมื่อปี ค.ศ. 1988 เป็นต้นมา รุ่นแรกเข้ามาด้วยการมุ่งหางานทำที่ดีกว่า รุ่นที่สองติดตามพ่อแม่เข้ามาโดยอิสระเพื่อการศึกษาที่ดีกว่าและกลายเป็นแรงงานฝีมือในเวลาต่อมา ปัจจุบัน (ช่วงทศวรรษ 2000) แรงงานอพยพส่วนใหญ่มีการศึกษาอย่างต่ำระดับปริญญาโท และประกอบอาชีพเป็นครูในสถาบันทางการศึกษา เป็นวิศวกรในวงการอุตสาหกรรม และบริษัทด้านการสื่อสาร มีแรงงานวิชาชีพที่มีประสบการณ์สูงที่ได้มีบทบาทในการพัฒนาโปรแกรมนานาชาติในสถาบันทางการศึกษาเอกชน หลายแห่งในกรุงเทพฯ ในช่วงทศวรรษ 1990 แม้ว่าแรงงานเหล่านี้ได้มีส่วนช่วยพัฒนา

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ประเทศไทยและเศรษฐกิจไทยมากกว่าทศวรรษ พวกเขาไม่ได้ต้องการปรับเปลี่ยนตนเองเป็นคนไทย รายได้ใน สัดส่วนมากที่สุดคงหมุนเวียนอยู่ในประเทศไทยเนื่องจากระบบการเงินธนาคารในพม่า ไม่มีประสิทธิภาพ การไร้เสถียรภาพทางเศรษฐกิจและสถานการณ์ทางการเมืองที่ผันผวนทำนายไม่ได้ ในพม่า ทำให้การส่งเงินกลับประเทศเพื่อการลงทุนทำธุรกิจในประเทศพม่ามีจำกัด อย่างไรก็ตาม การเลือกตั้ง ในพม่าในปี 2010 และพัฒนาการทางการเมืองที่ไม่เคยปรากฏมาก่อน ทำให้การวางแผนอนาคตของ แรงงานฝีมือพม่าในประเทศไทยเปลี่ยนไป

INTRODUCTION

The mobility of skilled workers from developing to developed countries has been increasing since the early 1990s (IOM, 2008: 51). About 10 per cent of Burma's population of approximately 55 million have migrated, either to seek refuge or to earn a living abroad (HRDU, 2009: 975). It is estimated that more than two million unskilled Burmese migrants and about 8,644 (as of 2006) skilled migrants (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009:70) are working in Thailand. Although there have been many research papers and articles about unskilled Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, there are virtually no previous studies on skilled migrants. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the socio-economic status of Burmese skilled migrants in Bangkok,¹ which is where the majority of them work.

In general, migrants with tertiary education and/or with academic and professional positions are defined as highly-skilled migrants (Numnak, 2005: IOM, 2008). In this paper, "skilled migrant workers" are

defined as those who entered Thailand legally (i.e. with passports) and work legally as professionals, technicians, and administrators in compliance with the rules and regulations of the Thai government. Of course, they all have obtained at least a bachelor's degree. These migrants can be classified into two generations: the first generation migrated to Thailand for better employment while the second generation came along with their parents or came independently for better education and eventually became skilled workers.

This paper examines how these migrants have achieved their expectations in the host country. Despite the fact that Thai and Burmese share a common predominant Buddhist culture, it is certain that Burmese migrants have faced many new challenges in their host country. This paper surveys whether Burmese migrants have been able to retain their identity or have simply assimilated into the urban lifestyle of Thailand after living in Bangkok for more than two decades. It also examines the contributions of Burmese expatriates towards the host country, and their future as Burma

¹There are also many skilled Burmese workers in other big cities, such as Chiangmai, Rayong, and Maesot. As the majority of them are concentrated in Bangkok, the study focuses on skilled migrants in Bangkok.

embarks on economic and political reforms. This paper is mainly based on primary data and information collected from personal interviews and survey questionnaires in Bangkok during June-July, 2012. In-depth details are drawn from the author's observations, experiences, and anecdotal evidence in the Burmese community of Bangkok.²

BACKGROUND OF SKILLED BURMESE MIGRATION INTO THAILAND

After the military coup in 1962, Burmese citizens were prevented from leaving the country by the government. However, as the government nationalized private enterprises, factories and banks in 1964, many thousands of Indians and Chinese left Burma for good. On the other hand, wage levels in neighbouring countries were not attractive enough to induce a Burmese outmigration at that time.

In the late 1960s, unemployment became rife in Burma as employment in the public sector was essentially fixed, and not many new jobs could be created in the private sector as the country was practicing socialist principles. According to Bixler (1971:114), in the years 1966-67 only 38,785 applicants (17.2 percent) were employed out of 225,000 people registered at the Rangoon Employment Exchange. In 1973, urban unemployment was estimated at 9.4 percent. In 1979, unemployment in Rangoon and Mandalay was over 14 percent and largely encompassed educated

individuals. By the late 1970s, however, the government allowed some Burmese nationals to leave the country to seek jobs as merchant sailors or in other occupations (Steinberg, 1990:55). As the Burmese economy continued to deteriorate with the growth rate falling steadily from 5.5 percent in the early 1980s to -4.0 percent in 1987-88 (Mya Than and Tan 1990: 4) and the value of the currency declining, an increasing number of people began leaving the country legally as well as illegally.

Following the 1988 crackdown, illegal and legal emigration has risen more rapidly. Burmese emigrants included skilled professionals, and technicians, as well as unskilled labourers. The protracted closure of universities and colleges also forced many university students, teachers, and educated people to leave the country. This 'brain drain' has become a steady flow since the late 1980s. As the military regime arrested many students and people who took part in the 1988 demonstration, thousands of people subsequently fled to Thailand, whilst others obtained political asylum in other countries, particularly Australia, the United States, and Canada.

The SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council), later renamed the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) regime started to implement economic reforms in the early 1990s which resulted in the creation of some job opportunities, particularly in the large cities. However, the inflation rate, as indicated by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) averaged 22 percent to 33 percent annually between 1992 and 1995. The CPI increased from

²The author has been working in Bangkok since 1990.

100 in 1986 to 369.09 in 1992-93 and then jumped to 882.81 in 1996-97 (CSO, 1997). While the official currency exchange rate was fixed at about 6 Kyat (K) per one dollar,³ the market rate was K25 per one dollar in 1988 and rose steadily to K270 per one dollar in 1997-98 (See details in Appendix A). This exorbitant inflation rate directly devalued the nominal wages of civil servants and reduced purchasing power. Although the daily wages for unskilled and skilled workers and salaries of employees in the private sector were much higher than the salaries paid in the government sector (See details in Appendix B), it was difficult to keep up with the rapid increase in consumer prices. Consequently, more and more Burmese were forced to leave the country in search of employment.

Unlike the deteriorating Burmese economy, between 1960 and 1995 the Thai economy grew dramatically at an average annual rate of 7 percent. During the 1980s, Thailand's investment policy encouraged the liberalisation of the domestic market and attracted foreign investment in manufacturing, export businesses; and international tourism which was also heavily promoted. Thailand's exports have grown by an average of 10 percent annually since 1985. This progress was particularly remarkable in the decade between 1985-95 (Min, 2000:13-14; Tsay 2000:1). In terms of the value of manufacturing exports, the annual growth rate was 25 percent in the early 1990s. These developments induced huge flows of skilled and unskilled labour

from other countries (Tsay, 2001:6-7). Subsequently, Burmese migrant workers arrived to replace the shortage of labour in Thailand.

Over the last three decades (from 1970 to 2000) the value of the Burmese currency (Kyat) against the Thai Baht has depreciated continuously. In 1970, one Kyat was worth three Baht. In 1988 one Kyat was equivalent to one Baht, and by 1996, it fell to K7 per Baht. By 1999, one Baht equalled K9.5 and more than K10 in early 2001.⁴ This drastic devaluation of Burmese currency against the Thai currency has also fostered outmigration.

The destruction of education systems and the deterioration of living standards led to the large influx of Burmese nationals in search of better employment and higher education to Thailand.

Immigration Policy of Thai Government

In the late 1970s, Thailand started to formally employ significant numbers of international migrants. This trend emerged in response to new demands from the expanding industrial and service sectors, which could not be met by the local workforce because of limited or non-existent expertise. As part of the government's efforts to incentivize foreign investment and facilitate industrial development, highly skilled professionals were allowed to immigrate in order to fill executive, managerial, and high-tech positions, mainly in foreign and national corporations concen-

³The central bank of Burma has set an official exchange rate of K818 against the US one dollar since April 2011.

⁴Personal communication with money brokers in Bangkok. In the late 2000s, one kyat was equivalent to Bt30.

trated in Bangkok and nearby provinces (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009:14).

As stated in the Immigration Act B.E. 2522, foreigners who wish stay and/or work in the country must first meet immigration requirements by obtaining a visa, except for visitors from neighbouring countries who, under special agreements, may attain a border pass at frontier checkpoints or in some cases are exempted from the visa requirement. There are two main types of visas: tourist visa granted to the applicant entering the country as tourists and non-immigrant visa for specific stay and work purposes.

Under the Immigration Act B.E. 2522 and the Alien Employment Act B.E. 2521 which was amended in 2008, the Thai government normally permits the employment of skilled foreign workers through three channels; namely permanent residency status, non-immigrant visas and other visas under Thailand's laws designed to promote foreign investment (Numnak, 2005:166-9). There are also many categories of non-immigrant visas, such as Business (B), Study or education (ED), Dependents or retired persons (O), etc. Burmese skilled migrants are granted work permits through the second channel (non-immigrant visa-B) and accounted for 5.6 percent of total foreigners with work permits (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009:51). The work permit is valid only for a particular job and employer and may have a geographical limitation. The worker's immediate family members are allowed to stay as dependents, but not allowed to work unless he or she is granted a separate work permit individually. A work permit is issued only for selected occupations for which expertise is considered lack-

ing in the country. The Royal Decree Stipulating Work in Occupations and Professions Prohibited to Aliens B.E. 2522 listed 39 activities (such as general labour, construction, weaving, and farming) disallowing foreign workers to be issued work permits.

Until the mid 1990s, the Burmese could easily apply for non-immigrant visa (B) (multi-entry) without any official documents (i.e. appointment letter, sponsor letter) at the Thai embassy in Rangoon. Foreigners with non-immigrant visas were permitted to stay in Thailand for 3 months. Multi-entry visa holders had to exit to another country (usually just cross the border to Malaysia or Cambodia) to extend their visa for another 3 months. These flexible immigration regulations made many Burmese stay in Bangkok not only seeking employment in Thailand, but also applying for visas for other countries such as Japan, the United States, Australia, and Canada.

The Role of the Burmese Government in Regulating Migration

The migration process of skilled migrant workers has been much safer than that of unskilled migrants. Usually, they did not suffer the worst privations experienced by illegal migrants. However, they did encounter many problems in Burma prior to migrating, such as difficulty of resigning from jobs in the government sector, paying education clearance to the government, and a long and expensive passport application process. Burmese nationals can apply for passports according to complex procedures which must include a letter of appointment from a firm in a for-

eign country.⁵ Thus applicants must secure guaranteed employment before being issued with a passport.

Large sums of money were required to pay brokers and some officials for passports, depending on their personal connection with these agents and their ability to bribe officials. According to one source, the real cost of a passport issued in one week is K500,000 (nearly US\$400) (Htet-Aung 2007:32). Some senior officials in the public sector took more than one year to obtain approval for their resignations depending on their individual employment position. Compensation, which was quite nominal (some thousands of Kyat), varied according to their education level and the length of their service in the government. By the mid-1990s, the Burmese government had even imposed some additional restrictions on the issue of passports to women, especially those below 25 years. Consequently, it had become more difficult and more costly for women to get a passport as compared to men. Another unrealistic regulation stipulated that migrants were not allowed to return to Burma within six months of leaving the country. Upon arrival, these migrants' passports would be confiscated. Compassionate leave for a death in the family or serious illness was not permitted either.

Additionally, emigrants were required to pay a tax equivalent to 10 percent of their earnings at the Burmese embassy in the foreign country, even prior to starting their employment. Even though some

people were unsuccessful in obtaining employment, they were not exempted. The vast majority of Burmese migrants did not declare their real income. Most appointment letters and salary statements were also falsified documents. Students also needed to pay tax because of false employment papers as there was no student category for passport applications.

If they did not pay the tax, they encountered problems such as a refusal to extend the passport or renew the passport, and they were unable to return to Burma as the original tax payment receipts must be presented at the airport⁶ on arrival. Air travel is the only legal mode of entry to Burma. Before 2006, even in their own country, Burmese nationals could not hold passports for more than six months, as the passport had to be returned to the immigration department after six months if holders did not leave the country within that period of time.

Since 2006, however, Burmese nationals have been allowed to retain their passports while they continue to reside in Burma. Nonetheless, these passport holders have to negotiate bureaucratic procedures, in that they must submit a "departure clearance form", at an immigration office after residing in Burma for more than 30 days after the issue of their passport.

All these complicated procedures deterred many Burmese, especially those from lower socio-economic groups, from applying for passports or from attempting to leave the country legally. Consequently,

⁵Almost all letters of appointment are falsified.

⁶This regulation was recently abolished and since early 2012 it is no longer necessary to pay the 10% tax.

the majority of Burmese entered Thailand illegally.

There have been neither private agents nor government recruitment programs in Burma for skilled workers in Thailand.⁷ All Burmese skilled migrants came to Thailand with the help of friends or relatives and the majority of them work in Bangkok.

PROFILE OF SKILLED MIGRANTS

In this study, a random sample which includes 34 men and 28 women who are currently working in Bangkok is interviewed. All sixty-two interviewees have been experiencing working situations and the urban lifestyle of Thailand for more than 10 years. Twenty-nine interviewees are first generation migrants who came to Bangkok for employment purposes and 33 respondents are from the second generation group who came for pursuing higher education (See Table 1 below).

Almost all skilled migrants are from the big cities of Burma with the largest proportion being ethnically Bamar (Burman).⁸ Small groups (less than 5 percent) consist of other ethnic groups such as, Shan,

Karen, Arakanese, and Mon.

The ages of the first generation migrants when they arrived in Thailand ranged between 23 and 55 years old. The largest proportion, 40 percent, was aged between 31 and 40 years old, as they had already completed their tertiary education and were old enough to stay apart from their families. The smallest group was aged between 51 and 55 and had less chance to be employed. In Burma, this first generation of skilled migrants had worked as government officials, university instructors and lecturers, high school teachers, and medical doctors.

Approximately 60 percent of the first generation women were single when they arrived in Thailand whereas 32 percent were married and 8 percent either widowed or divorced. It is evident that as single women having no spouses for financial dependence, they were more likely to be forced to seek a better form of employment and a higher income. Moreover, they may have less attachment to their families which is a contributing factor for migration.

Second generation migrants came with their parents or came independently to

Table 1: Gender of Respondents by Migration Groups

Gender	First Generation		Second Generation		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Male	16	55.2	18	54.5	34	54.8
Female	13	44.8	15	45.5	28	45.2
Total	29	100.0	33	100.0	62	100.0

⁷Burma's State Labour Department and the state-run Overseas Employment Company and some private employment agencies have been sending selected skilled Burmese male workers to Singapore, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates.

⁸Although they simply identify themselves as Bamar, they may be Sino-Burmese or Indo-Burmese or mixed blood of other races.

Bangkok for their tertiary education and obtained white-collar jobs in Thailand. At the time of their arrival in Bangkok, their average ages varied from 15 to 35 years old. There were also very young children who came along with their working parents and studied in either Thai or international schools.

Educational Attainment

Educational attainments of the respondents vary from Bachelor's degrees to Ph.Ds (See Table 2). Approximately 60 percent of respondents have completed Master's degrees. Some of the first generation group had already attained Master's or Ph.D degrees before they left Burma. Some attained these higher degrees in Thailand or in other countries after migrating to Thailand as the Burmese education sys-

tem was deteriorating and there were very limited opportunities for tertiary education in Burma.⁹ Some respondents are currently pursuing Master's and Ph.D degrees or will do so in the near future. It is evident that Burmese migrants in the host country have gained better opportunities for their further studies than if they remained in Burma.

Although they were well-educated, not all were employed as soon as they arrived in Bangkok. While searching for a proper job, some migrants had to attend work-related courses, such as Master's and Diploma programs, language and computer classes, and/or some took up other part-time jobs without a work permit. As shown in Table 3, the majority (about 60 percent) of both first and second generation migrants had to wait for 6-12 months to get full-time jobs with work permits whereas 20.7 percent of the first generation had to

Table 2: Educational Attainment of Migration Groups

Degree	First Generation		Second Generation		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Bachelor	9	31.0	12	36.4	21	33.9
Master	18	62.1	19	57.6	37	59.7
Ph.D	2	6.9	2	6.0	4	6.4
Total	29	100.0	33	100.0	62	100.0

Table 3: Number of months waiting for a proper job

No. of Months	First Generation (after arriving in Bangkok)		Second Generation (after graduating in Bangkok)		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
< 6 months	5	17.2	8	24.2	13	21.0
6-12 months	18	62.1	20	60.6	38	61.3
>12 months	6	20.7	5	15.2	11	17.7
Total	29	100.0	33	100.0	62	100.0

⁹Due to the 1988 and 1996 uprising, universities and colleges were closed for some years and many students had to suspend their studies.

wait for longer than one year.

Even if the unemployment situation became intolerable, Burmese migrants were unable to return home within 6 months. This regulation exacerbated the grief of a number of migrants (especially in the first generation) whose parents died in the few months after their migration. In addition, all taxes had to be paid at the Burmese embassy and they had to have official leave documents from their employers as mentioned in the previous section. All these documents needed be shown at the immigration counter of the Rangoon airport on their arrival which caused more troubles to those who were still unemployed.

Employment of Skilled migrants

More than 50 percent of first generation migrants work in teaching institutions, such as universities, colleges, international schools, and language schools in Thailand where the medium of instruction is English.

The stream of skilled migration started after the 1988 uprising when universities and colleges were closed for three years in Burma and when private educational institutions (international programs) started flourishing in Thailand. That is why the majority of the first generation migrants

were employed in teaching institutions. It is estimated that in the early 1990s about 50 percent of the lecturers at a well-known private international university were Burmese. All of them used to be rectors, professors, and lecturers in Burma before they moved to Thailand.

Some 32 percent hold other jobs - in IT (Information Technology) firms, engineering companies, and research projects where communicating in Thai is less required for employees. The smallest group (only 6.9 percent) is engaged in office work as accountants, secretaries, or administrative assistants mainly due to Thai labour policy towards the recruitment of foreign workers and language barriers. A few percent of respondents work in NGOs as medical staff and research assistants as categorized in 'Others' (See Table 4).

However, some of the first generation group migrated further to third countries, such as the U.S.A, Canada, and Australia, while some retired. Moreover, since international universities and colleges do not employ Bachelor degree holders anymore and the initial salary of teaching institutions is lower than for other types of employment, the percentage of second generation migrants (new graduates) has declined in the teaching occupation.

Table 4: Employment of Migration Groups

Employment	First Generation		Second Generation		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teaching	16	55.2	8	24.2	24	38.7
IT/Engineering	9	31.0	15	45.5	24	38.7
Service (Hospital)	1	3.45	6	18.2	7	11.3
Admin (Office work)	2	6.9	3	9.1	5	8.1
Others	1	3.45	1	3.0	2	3.2
Total	29	100.0	33	100.0	62	100.0

As shown in Table 4, the largest percentage (45.5 percent) of the second generation group are employed in IT (Information Technology) and engineering companies. According to one source, in the IT sector, low salaries and scarce opportunities for career advancement cannot attract Thai specialists to come back home after graduating overseas institutions (Chalamwong and Tansaewee 2005). Moreover, despite the increasing numbers of graduates and investments by both the government and private sectors to increase qualified engineers, Thailand will continue to experience a labor shortage for a certain period in the future. More must be done to promote high-quality technical education and increase the capacity of the system to train students and possibly ease requirements for employing foreign nationals (Russel, 2007). As a result, many Burmese IT technicians and engineers have landed IT and engineering jobs quite easily in Thailand.

Another job available for Burmese graduates is in private hospitals in Bangkok as coordinators or interpreters for Burmese patients. Since 2003, Thailand has been promoting itself in an attempt to become a

medical hub within Asia in competition with Malaysia and Singapore. More than 400 hospitals in Bangkok offer the most advanced treatments available, provided by internationally trained medical staff. These leading private hospitals have been actively encouraging medical tourists to visit Thailand. The number of international patients (including Burmese patients) has been increasing in the leading private hospitals in Bangkok (Chunlaka, 2010:22). From personal contact with Burmese staff at private hospitals, it is estimated that there are 3,000-4,000 Burmese patients per month receiving medical treatments at some of the more well-known hospitals. In order to provide good service, the hospitals employ young Burmese who can also speak Thai as interpreters, liaison staff, or marketing staff. Some medical doctors also work as coordinators for Thai physicians. Some 18 percent of the second generation respondents work at private hospitals (See in Table 4).

The salaries of newly appointed migrants range between Bt18,000-25,000 depending on different types of employment. Skilled migrants who have been working for more than 10 years currently earn be-

Table 5: Estimated Monthly Salary of Migration Groups

Baht	First Generation		Second Generation		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<20,000	0	0.0	1	3.0	1	1.6
20,000-30,000	0	0.0	5	15.2	5	8.1
30,000-40,000	6	20.7	13	39.4	19	30.6
40,000-60,000	12	41.4	8	24.2	20	32.3
60,000-80,000	5	17.2	3	9.1	8	12.9
80,000-100,000	4	13.8	2	6.1	6	9.7
>100,000	2	6.9	1	3.0	3	4.8
Total	29	100.0	33	100.0	62	100.0

tween Bt40,000 and Bt100,000 per month. Teaching staff earn less than IT technicians and engineers. Those who hold high positions in INGOs (International Non-Government Organizations) and multi-national companies earn more than Bt100,000 per month. Since first generation migrants have been working more than 10 years, all of them have already earned salaries of more than Baht 30,000, whereas some 18 percent of second generation migrants with only a few years of working experience earned less than Baht 30,000 per month. (See in Table 5)

Wage disparity by gender is virtually unknown. However, according to the author's experience and interviews, although skilled migrants can obtain high employment status, they have less voice or they feel discrimination from their Thai colleagues in their work places.

RETAINING BURMESE IDENTITY OR ASSIMILATING INTO THAI SOCIETY

After living for one to three decades in Thailand, it is questionable whether the skilled Burmese migrants have still been able to retain their Burmese identity or have inevitably adopted Thai language, social,

and cultural norms. Thandi (2011:84) states that the young generation inevitably lost its identity through acculturation, assimilation, intermarriage, or conversion in the host country. Angelo (1997:18) defines assimilative variables, such as marriage, attitude, and behavioural receptiveness which push the migrants towards becoming integrated into the mainstream of the host country. Therefore, this section examines what language they speak; what dress they wear; what nationality they married, and their relationship with Thai colleagues/peers.

Language

They usually use the English language in their daily interactions at work because it is not quite necessary to speak Thai among English speaking Thai colleagues and their students. As a result, about 38 percent of first generation respondents still barely speak Thai even though they have been in Bangkok for more than two decades whereas 41 percent are fairly fluent. The second generation is more fluent than the first generation as seen in Table 6. The nature of work, the work environment, and other requirements generally forced them to speak in Thai. Those who work among Thai co-workers with limited ability to

Table 6: Fluency in Thai by Migration Groups

	First Generation		Second Generation		Total	
Poor	5	17.2	4	12.1	9	14.5
Little	6	20.7	4	12.1	10	16.1
Fair	12	41.4	9	27.3	21	33.9
Good	5	17.2	6	18.2	11	17.7
Fluent	1	3.4	10	30.3	11	17.7
Total	29	100.0	33	100.0	62	100.0

speak English can also speak Thai more fluently. As the majority of the second generation was aged 15-20 years when they migrated to Thailand they could easily acculturate. However, only 1.5 percent of respondents can read and write Thai.

Almost all Burmese migrants speak their mother language at home and with their Burmese companions. The children born in Thailand (third generation) can also speak Burmese fluently, but reading and writing is questionable. This indicates that educated Burmese migrants in Bangkok can strongly retain their native language.

Attire

The mode of dressing is greatly influenced by the indigenization trend, with almost all Burmese adopting the Western attire (trousers and skirts) at work places. No men wear traditional Burmese sarong but a few women wear Burmese attire at their work. There seems to be a somewhat high extent of assimilation and integration of Burmese migrants into Thai society in terms of physical appearance. In fact, the main reason why they do not wear Burmese traditional dress, especially the 'sarong' is due to the negative perception of many Thai people towards the Burmese. In their daily life they have to face the Thai construction of being Burmese, known as 'Pama' a term associated with the historical enemy in the Thai nationalist discourse (Faucher, 2010). In addition, as there are more than two millions unskilled Burmese workers in Thailand, it is not surprising that many Thai people generally regard any Burmese as an illegal migrant worker. One Thai labour activist states that the Thai

middle class in the city views migrant workers as a threat or posing a problem for them based on the historical and ethnic bias (Rojanaphruk, 2012). Thus, the educated Burmese just try to avoid the prejudices (misperception) of Thai people and to take preventative measures for potential jeopardy by only occasionally wearing Burmese attire. More or less, trousers and skirts are an international dress standard that does not allow an observer to distinguish between the features of a native Thai or a Burmese. It cannot be assumed that their daily clothing proves the true identity of a particular nationality.

Relationship with Thai Neighbours or Friends

It can be observed that as there are big communities of the educated Burmese in Bangkok they prefer socializing with Burmese friends rather than Thai friends. More than 90 percent of respondents have no close Thai friends and only young Burmese who have a Thai fiancé or Thai spouse have close relationship with Thais. Merely 10 percent of interviewees often join social and religious functions of Thai peers, such as weddings, funerals even though the great majority of Thai and Burmese are Buddhist and both have very similar culture norms. Out of 31 married people, only 5 men and 2 women (they all are in the second generation) married Thai people. Approximately 5 percent of first generation migrants got married after arriving in Thailand, but all their spouses are Burmese. Since young migrants have grown up in Thai society, it seems that the younger generation is more likely to assimilate into Thai

culture and society than the old generation and also more easily adapted into the new culture. However, the survey data shows that the vast majority of both the old and young generations have rarely socialized with Thai friends.

Faucher (2010:72) also claims that all her Burmese respondents refer to a situation of isolation, stigmatization, mistrust, and ostracism from their classmates or co-workers. They just try to cooperate despite these representations in the framing of their daily interaction with Thai people.

Therefore, it can generally be concluded that Burmese skilled migrants in Bangkok are not willing to make the effort of integration into Thai society.

CONTRIBUTION OF SKILLED BURMESE MIGRANTS TO THE THAI ECONOMY/SOCIETY

Although there is no reliable data on how much skilled Burmese migrants have contributed to the Thai economy, it is quite certain that some hundreds of Burmese professionals have played an important role in the development of international private educational institutions in the early 1990s. For example, they worked as deans of new faculties and heads of departments in the setting up of new curricula for the interna-

tional programs of some universities and colleges in Thailand. They still contribute to the educational sector of Thailand.

A large number of very experienced Burmese engineers (especially first generation) and IT experts (mostly second generation) also work in high positions of key industries and IT companies, such as TPI (Thai Petroleum Industry),¹⁰ Thaicom Public Company Ltd.¹¹ and many other multinational firms.

Moreover, a large proportion of their earnings also flow into the Thai economy. As the majority of respondents are from well-to-do or upper middle class families, they do not need to use very much to financially support their families back home and do not send money home regularly. Most of their income is spent on daily expenses, their children's education, their further studies (post graduate degrees), and medical treatments for their parents in Thailand.

A previous study (Turnell, Vicary, & Bradford, 2009) found that the remittances decline again usually as a consequence of migrants settling down in their host country, and losing touch with their family members back home, although their remittances increase after 5 years or so of working in the host countries. The respondents (who have been working in Thailand for more than 10 years) in this study also prove that

¹⁰The TPI group is a pioneer in the petrochemical and petroleum businesses in Thailand and in the region. There are six companies within this group: Thai Petrochemical Industry Public Company Limited, TPI oil Co. Ltd., Thai ABS Co. Ltd., TPI Polyol Co. Ltd., Thai Polyurethane Industry Co. Ltd. And Thai Aromatics Public Co. Ltd.

¹¹It was formerly known as Shin Satellite Plc (SATTEL), Thailand's first satellite operator. It is a subsidiary of Shin Corporation, the biggest telecommunications conglomerate in Thailand. It operates the THAICOM satellite fleet and other telecommunication businesses in Thailand and throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

they remit irregularly or not at all to families back home.

As dependents of skilled migrants are permitted to live in Thailand under the Thai Immigration Act, the majority of them have family members in Thailand. Under-developed infrastructures in Burma such as irregular electricity supply, water supply, and limited access to the Internet and telecommunications pushed the dependents of migrants to join the breadwinning family member in the host country. Another push factor is the inaccessible health care service in Burma which has also forced elderly parents to take medical treatment in Bangkok. The ineffective education system has also caused children of skilled migrants to study in the host country rather than in Burma. Therefore, it can be seen that much of the earnings of skilled migrants are spent in Thailand rather than in Burma.

However, for other migrants whose families are in Burma, their monthly remittance can be estimated at approximately Bt8,000-20,000. It is found that a very small percent of respondents remitted money for their families' or their own businesses. Unpredictable political and economic circumstances also hindered migrants' investment in local businesses but about 3 percent of respondents have bought small plots of land, houses, and/or apartment units in Burma. In addition, owing to the unstable Burmese currency rate, an unreliable banking system, and unpredictable fiscal policies, no Burmese migrant remitted money through official channels. The vast majority of Burmese migrants do not save their money in Burmese banks. They rather saved in Thai banks or pur-

chased some properties in Thailand, such as condo units and cars.

Survey data indicate that 10 percent of women and 2 percent of men have bought condos and apartment rooms in Bangkok and some of these female owners can make extra income from renting the rooms. It implies that women are more prudent and more business-minded than men.

Therefore, it can be seen that much of the earnings of skilled Burmese migrants go into the economy of Thailand rather than into Burma.

FUTURE OF SKILLED MIGRANT WORKERS

It should be noted that thanks to migration not only did skilled migrants gain higher degrees (Master's, Ph.Ds) in Thailand and abroad, but their children also achieved better opportunities for their education and employment than in Burma, where those opportunities are very limited. Some large institutions provide welfare for children's education. The working experiences and higher educational attainments are benefits of migration for the development of the home country when and if the migrants return home in the future.

The majority of skilled migrants have been in Thailand for more than 10 years and appear to have settled there. They did not have plans to go back and settle down in Burma partly due to the potential salary in Burma likely being much lower than their current income in Thailand and partly due to the, as yet, fragile political situation in Burma.

A small percentage of migrants re-

turned to Burma to get married or due to retirement.¹² Some migrants who have already retired, stay on in Thailand with retirement visas. More than 15 percent of second generation migrants have plans for postgraduate studies in other countries. Some have plans to migrate (or have migrated) to more developed countries, such as Australia, Canada, or the United States. In fact, the vast majority of Burmese migrants are not eligible to be permanent residents, under the Employment Category; a foreigner must earn at least 80,000 Baht per month for two years. He or she also must have held a work permit for at least three consecutive years and worked in the current company for at least one year. Salaries of many Burmese expatriates do not fulfil that requirement. In addition, the benefits (pension, health care scheme) of being permanent residents are not quite attractive to many Burmese. Some small institutions do not sponsor the spouses and dependents for residential permits. As a result, they cannot settle down in Thailand in the future, so they will have to return to Burma one day or go somewhere else.

For the time being, Thailand as Burma's neighbouring Buddhist country with a similar culture is a good place for a temporary stay for educated Burmese. Although their salaries are not as high as those in other developed countries, they can still retain a relatively high socio-economic status as skilled workers or professionals. Their financial support helps relieve the economic hardship of their families back home and family members are also able to visit or stay

in Thailand. It seems that skilled Burmese migrant workers enjoy a better life in Thailand than they would in Burma. The majority of them in Bangkok have not previously had any intention of returning home. However, Burma has been undergoing unprecedented developments in politics and the economy since the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and the 2011 by-election with the participation of her NLD (National League for Democracy) party. Currently, the improving banking systems in Burma, with a more stable exchange rate of Burmese currency and high interest rate (8 percent per year), will be able to induce more Burmese migrants to remit money for more investment in their home country. While foreign investments are flowing into Burma creating more job opportunities for locals, businesses are facing a shortage of skilled professionals. Thanks to a great deal of emerging business opportunities and employment prospects, some migrants especially the young educated (7 percent of second generation respondents) have started doing (planning) some business and 18 percent of respondents are becoming interested in working back in their home country. More than 50 percent of respondents want to put on hold any decision to return home until after the general election in 2015 which the Thein Sein government promised to hold.

Burma is also expected to receive more foreign direct investment (FDI) following the ASEAN trade and investment liberalization in 2015. ASEAN countries are moving towards the AEC (Asean Eco-

¹²Retirement age depends on individual private institutions. Some people can work till the age of 70-75 years. One female Burmese lecturer retired after graduating with a Ph.D at age 82.

conomic Community) which will take effect in December 2015, to promote the free flow of goods, services, and capital across the region. If the democratization process of the country continues efficiently after the general election, more developments in the economy, education, and other sectors will simultaneously emerge. Burmese migrants who never dreamed of return home previously, can now see rays of hope and a bright future ahead in their motherland. It can be anticipated that along with the economic and political developments, many Burmese migrants will bring back their expertise and knowledge and/or remit more money to the home country in the future.

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