

Expanding the Number of Semi-skilled and Skilled Emigrant Workers from Southeast Asia to East Asia

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization links East and Southeast Asian economies not only through flows of trade, technology and capital, but also through the inter-regional flow of labor. Labor integration among the Southeast Asian and East Asian regions can be challenging owing to differences in economic, political and social situations. Unbalanced growth, a widening income gap, and border crossings between neighboring countries with strong ethnic affinities contribute to a growing inter-regional labor market. Comparative advantage in wage rates is also a major driving force for labor migration between those regions. Leading exporting industries rely on cheap labor to remain competitive in their production systems. At the same time countries with rapid population and labor-force growth rates are able to supply labor to exporting countries. The imbalance between economic and social development between the labor-receiving (East Asian) and labor-sending (Southeast Asian) countries is likely to generate an increasing flow of migrants in the regional labor market.

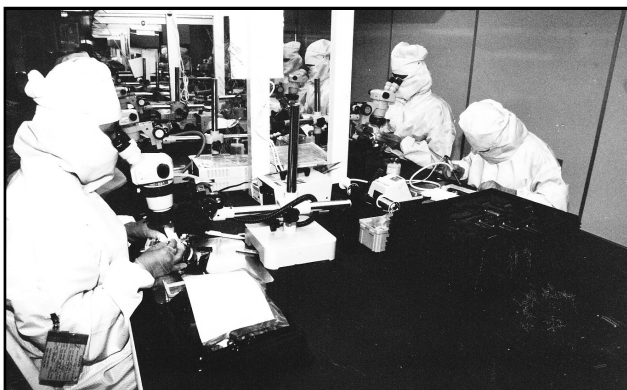
This article is aimed at reviewing the highlights of major trends in international migration from Southeast Asian to East Asian societies (Japan, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the Republic of

China (ROC) or Taiwan), focusing on both highly-skilled workers and low-skilled workers. This paper describes the transformation of economic development and the labor market, patterns of movement of workers between Southeast Asia and East Asia, and migration policies, and provides a conclusion.

2. TRANSFORMATION OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND THE LABOR MARKET

Differences in economic growth among the less developed countries and developed countries present gaps between richer and poorer countries. Large numbers of both low-skilled workers and highly-skilled workers from less developed Southeast Asian countries tend to move to more advanced countries. The significant gaps in 2005 among countries in the Southeast Asian region are reflected in per capita GDP: for example, in Singapore, the difference was 2.6 times greater than in Malaysia and 3.5 times more than in Thailand. The gap between per capita GDP in Singapore was more than 11 times higher than the GDP of Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Myanmar (Tables 1 and 2).

The income inequality among the developing and transitional economies in Southeast Asia and those in East Asia is likely to grow greater. The lack of job opportunities and low salaries in less developed countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia serve to push the labor force elsewhere. The disparity in income may be one of many factors that explain emigration to the East Asian countries. Poverty in less developed countries and differences in wage rates force workers to migrate to exporting countries so that they can earn a better living and support their families in their home countries. Table 3 indicates the manufacturing wage indices among various countries.



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Table 1 Gross Domestic Product and Per Capita GDP of Selected Southeast Asian and East Asian Countries

	GDP ^{1/} (percentage)					GDP per capita ^{2/} (constant US dollars in 2000)			
	1995	2000	2005	2006	2007	1995	2000	2004	2005
Southeast Asia									
Cambodia	6.5	8.4	6.3	5.0	6.5	232	283	328	356
Indonesia	8.2	4.9	5.8	5.2	6.0	827	800	906	942
Lao PDR	7.0	5.8	7.3	7.3	6.6	273	326	372	396
Malaysia	9.8	8.9	5.5	5.5	5.8	3,468	3,881	4,221	4,434
Myanmar	7.2	13.7	4.5	7.0	5.5	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Philippines	4.7	4.4	4.7	5.0	5.4	916	991	1,079	1,124
Singapore	8.0	9.6	3.9	6.9	4.5	19,152	22,767	23,636	25,443
Thailand	9.2	4.8	3.5	4.5	5.0	2,048	2,021	2,399	2,440
Timor-Leste	0.7	-6.9	6.6	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	406	355	n.a.
Vietnam	9.5	6.8	7.5	7.8	7.6	305	397	500	539
East Asia									
Japan	2.0	2.4	2.0	2.7	2.1	35,304	37,409	39,195	39,592
Republic of Korea	9.2	8.5	3.8	5.0	4.3	9,164	10,890	12,743	13,210
China	10.5	8.0	9.0	10.0	10.0	603	856	1,162	1,445

Sources: ^{1/} IMF, World Economic Outlook Database, September 2006.

^{2/} World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2006.

Table 2 Population and Labor Force of Selected Southeast Asian and East Asian Countries

	Population ^{1/}					
	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Southeast Asia						
Cambodia	11,368	12,744	14,071	15,530	17,066	18,580
Indonesia	195,649	209,174	222,782	235,755	246,813	255,853
Lao PDR	4,686	5,279	5,924	6,604	7,306	8,014
Malaysia	20,362	22,997	25,347	27,532	29,558	31,474
Myanmar	44,500	47,724	50,519	52,801	54,971	57,054
Philippines	68,396	75,766	83,054	90,048	96,840	103,266
Singapore	3,478	4,017	4,326	4,590	4,815	4,986
Thailand	58,336	61,438	64,233	66,785	69,064	71,044
Timor-Leste	848	722	947	1,244	1,486	1,713
Vietnam	73,163	78,671	84,238	89,718	95,029	99,928
East Asia						
Japan	125,472	127,034	128,085	128,457	127,993	126,713
Republic of Korea	45,007	46,779	47,817	48,566	49,092	49,393
China	1,219,331	1,273,979	1,315,844	1,354,533	1,392,980	1,423,939
	Labor force ^{2/} (age 15-64)					
	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Southeast Asia						
Cambodia	5,084	5,410	7,994	8,267	10,297	11,394
Indonesia	86,182	98,742	108,361	110,432	128,117	136,917
Lao PDR	1,771	2,023	2,355	2,427	3,131	3,563
Malaysia	8,227	9,684	11,013	11,288	13,815	15,207
Myanmar	22,249	24,832	27,427	27,954	32,339	34,283
Philippines	27,399	30,761	37,093	38,294	49,170	54,475
Singapore	1,740	2,059	2,207	2,238	2,484	2,500
Thailand	31,501	33,586	35,715	36,136	39,071	39,781
Timor-Leste	317	256	383	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Vietnam	35,409	39,770	44,608	45,628	53,415	56,191
East Asia						
Japan	66,903	6,7705	66,702	66,361	61,650	59,646
Republic of Korea	21,300	22,501	24,121	24,341	25,895	26,301
China	708,783	745,715	782,782	789,652	826,250	818,466

Sources: ^{1/} UN Population Prospects 2004 Revision Database.

^{2/} ILO, Laborsta, Economically Active Population Estimates and Projection (Version 5).

Table 3 Manufacturing Wage Indices of Selected Southeast Asian and East Asian Countries

(1995=100)

	1995	2000	2001	2002	2003
Southeast Asia					
Cambodia	-	-	78.7	-	-
Indonesia	100	109.9	130.0	-	-
Lao PDR	-	-	-	-	-
Malaysia	100	118.6	129.1	-	-
Myanmar	-	-	-	-	-
Philippines	100	-	-	-	-
Singapore	100	134.4	136.7	138.8	143.0
Thailand*	100	117.1	128.2	124.6	133.2
Timor-Leste	-	-	-	-	-
Vietnam	-	-	-	-	-
East Asia					
Japan	100	103.6	105.9	106.4	106.8
Republic of Korea	100	117.3	119.8	130.6	137.3
China	100	155.3	172.2	195.4	-

Note: Cambodia base year = 1996.

Sources: ILO, Key Indicators of the Labors Market (KIM), 4th edition, Table 15.

* Labor Force Survey, various years.

Countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR, have seen a remarkable decline in income poverty during the past two decades based on the US\$1 per day criterion. On average, many workers in Indonesia and Vietnam earn a wage of less than US\$1 per day. People in Cambodia and Lao PDR and half the population of Indonesia live below the US\$2 per day poverty line. People living in countries characterized by “poverty stickiness” are likely to seek better opportunities elsewhere wherever such opportunities open up.

Evidently, the Republic of Korea and China have had a remarkable economic recovery following the crisis of 1997/98 owing to accelerated economic growth in export and the revival of their labor markets. A continuation of the economic upturn in Japan, the Republic of Korea, PRC, Hong Kong (China) and ROC during the past decade has created a “pull factor” that has had a major impact on the labor markets of the region. The strong demand for unskilled and highly-skilled labor in these countries cannot be met by local nationals, a situation which leads to an increasing demand for immigrants from Southeast Asian countries. Garson (2001) estimated that the labor shortages in most OECD member countries would be most severe over the next 25 years due mainly to low rates of natural population growth, and the promotion of immigration would seem to be an effective measure to increase the labor supply and ease the labor shortages. The push and pull factors mentioned above are likely to affect the movement of labor in the region, especially between Southeast Asian and East Asian countries.

Even though developed countries have shifted from relying on a knowledge-based economy to high-level skills, they still rely on labor-intensive export industries. As a consequence, these countries still continuously experience labor shortages. Many countries have opened their doors to both highly-skilled professionals and low- or semi-skilled workers from countries within East Asia and Southeast Asia. Trends and patterns of migration in the East Asian and Southeast Asian regions are described in the next section of this paper. Reviews of the trends and patterns of both low- and highly-skilled workers from Southeast Asia emigrating to East Asia are relevant with regard to each country’s laws and policies. In the final section, policy coherence between Southeast Asian and East Asian countries is discussed and recommendations are made.

3. TRENDS AND PATTERNS OF MIGRATION

3.1 Documented Workers (mainly semi-skilled)

3.1.1 Migration from Southeast Asia to East Asia (1990 to 2005)

Multilateral and bilateral trade agreements have provided opportunities for export growth, economic growth and employment creation. Currently, demand for skilled labor continues to increase in East Asian countries. Therefore, the level of employment and the wages for skilled workers have also increased, widening the wage gap between low-skilled and semi-skilled or highly-skilled workers (Table 3).

The number of legal immigrant workers who are granted permanent residence and permission to take up temporary employment under the immigration act in each country are presented in Table 4. The emigration of people from Southeast Asia to East Asia is likely to rise over the studied periods. Japan is the major destination for workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and the Philippines. These countries accounted for 2,263, 2,393, 5,342 and 187,261 migrants, respectively, and their numbers continue to increase. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand are the major exporters of labor to PRC. The numbers of emigrants to China from these countries are, respectively, 88,086, 107,084, 165,666 and 92,584. Vietnamese migrants to the Republic of Korea reached a high of 12,332 in 2003. Vietnam has been promoting and implementing its labor-exporting policy very aggressively during the past few years. Since Vietnam has a very large workforce, the lack of job opportunities at home and poverty have pushed able persons to seek better opportunities elsewhere in East Asia, where job markets are plentiful for semi-skilled workers.

The trend of emigration continues to rise to the present date for Japan and PRC, but it is declining for emigrants to ROC coming from the Philippines. The major destinations for workers from Singapore are PRC and Japan, with the number of migrants being 165,666, and 2,283, respectively. As in other less developing countries of the region, the major destinations of workers from Thailand, with rising tendency, are PRC (92,584), Japan (37,703), and the Republic of Korea (4,227); however, the number going to ROC (18,665) is declining. The major destinations for workers from emerging labor-exporting countries, such as Vietnam, are Japan (2,202), ROC (13,245), and the Republic of Korea (12,332).

3.1.2 Migration from East Asia to Southeast Asia (1990 to 2005)

Labor migration from East Asia to Southeast Asia is tending to increase rather than decrease. From 1990 to 2005, the major destinations for workers from PRC, ROC and the Republic of Korea were Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. The main destinations of emigrants from PRC were Vietnam (574,238), Thailand (9,573) and the Philippines (1,098). The ROC emigrants to Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines during the period studied totaled 183,650, 5,133 and 506, respectively. The numbers of workers from the Republic of Korea migrating to Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines were 111,460, 4,790 and 1,881, respectively. The major destinations for emigrant workers from Japan are ASEAN countries in which Japan has invested. The numbers of workers emigrating to Thailand were 36,327; Singapore, 24,902; the Philippines, 12,913; Indonesia, 11,211; Malaysia, 10,347; and Vietnam, 4,207 (Table 5).

3.2 Undocumented Workers

3.2.1 Undocumented Workers in East Asia

No matter how strict law enforcement is with regard to enforcing migration policies in host countries, the number of illegal workers still persists and continues to rise. In general, the number of illegal immigrant workers in the East Asian countries varies depending upon the various socio-economic conditions, and rules and regulations of the countries of origin and destination. In 2003, the number of illegal migrants from various countries traveling to Hong Kong (China) was 16,548 (Chiu 2005). Illegal migrants to Japan were from

Table 4 Migration from Southeast Asia to East Asia (1990 to 2005)

	People's Republic of China (PRC)	Japan	Republic of China (ROC)	Republic of Korea
Cambodia	-	2,263	-	-
Indonesia	88,086	25,097	-	-
Lao PDR	-	2,393	-	-
Malaysia	107,084	7,910	-	-
Myanmar	-	5,342	-	-
Philippines	87,205	187,261	28,385	4,460
Singapore	165,666	2,283	-	-
Thailand	92,584	37,703	18,665	4,227
Vietnam	-	2,202	13,245	12,332

(Persons)

Note: Philippines to ROC and the Republic of Korea in 2003.

- Sources: 1) General Statistics Office of Vietnam.
 2) Judicial System and Research Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Justice, Japan.
 3) Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, Indonesia.
 4) National Bureau of Statistics, China; Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) www.poea.gov.ph.
 5) Table Office of Overseas Employment Administration, Department of Employment, Ministry of Industry, Thailand.

Table 5 Migration from East Asia to Southeast Asia (1990 to 2005)

(Persons)

	Brunei Darussalam	Cambodia	Indonesia	Lao PDR	Malaysia	Myanmar	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
People's Republic of China (PRC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,098	-	9,573	574,238
Japan	101	818	11,221	436	10,347	663	12,913	24,902	36,327	4,207
Republic of China (ROC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	506	-	5,133	183,650
Republic of Korea	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,881	-	4,790	111,460

Note: From PRC, ROC and the Republic of Korea to the Philippines in 2002, and to Vietnam in 2003.

- Sources: 1) Consular and Migration Affairs Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan.
 2) General Statistics Office of Vietnam.
 3) Judicial System and Research Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Justice, Japan.
 4) Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, Indonesia.
 5) National Bureau of Statistics, China; Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) www.poea.gov.ph.
 6) Table Office of Overseas Employment Administration, Department of Employment, Ministry of Industry, Thailand.

the Republic of Korea (46,425), China (33,522), and the Philippines (31,428) (Igushi 2005). In 2004, the number of illegal migrants to the Republic of Korea totaled 181,499 (Park 2005).

3.2.2 Undocumented Workers in the ASEAN Region

The developing countries in ASEAN have also experienced a very similar situation to that of the East Asian countries. The region still experiences wage and income disparities. The host countries have experienced shortages in unskilled workers. A study conducted by Kanapathy (2005) showed that 1.2 million workers in Malaysia were illegal migrants, who were mainly Indonesian and other Muslims from various Muslim countries. Thailand is surrounded by poor or low-income countries such as Lao PDR, Cambodia and Myanmar. It is for this reason that the illegal migrants in Thailand are largely from these neighboring countries; such migrants exceeded 1.2 million persons in 2006 (Yongyuth 2005a; Yongyuth 2005b).

3.3 Migration among ASEAN Member Countries in 2006

ASEAN countries with economies that have a high potential to create jobs for semi- and highly-skilled workers, especially in export sectors. Since 1995 Vietnam and Cambodia shifted from demanding labor in low productivity sectors such as agriculture to higher productivity sectors such as industry and services. The greater economic expansion has created competition, greater labor-market pressures and widened the wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers. The growing cross-border mobility of labor has benefited the sending and receiving countries as well as the migrant workers. However, the large number of irregular migrant workers has raised concern about migration management (Athukorala 2004; Skeldon 2005).

Thailand is the major destination for people from Cambodia (0.23 million), Lao PDR (0.26 million) and Myanmar (1.4 million). Workers from Indonesia, the

Philippines and Singapore immigrate mostly to Malaysia, their numbers totaling 1.2 million, 0.3 million and 0.09 million, respectively. The major destinations for workers from Indonesia are Malaysia and Singapore, i.e., 1.2 million and 0.1 million, respectively. Singapore is the richest country in the ASEAN region and has become the major destination for ASEAN migrant workers, 0.99 million of them. The major destinations for people from Myanmar are Thailand (1.38 million), and Malaysia (0.09 million). The major destinations for workers from Thailand are Cambodia (0.13 million), and Malaysia (0.07 million). The major destinations for workers from Vietnam are Cambodia (0.16 million), Malaysia (0.09 million), and Lao PDR (0.015 million) (see Table 6).

4. MIGRATION POLICIES

The countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia need to address growing inequalities, both within and between countries. The labor market has contributed to reducing inequalities and supporting both highly- and low-skilled workers. All countries also need to build the capacities of local firms in order to compete effectively with multinational enterprises (MNEs) and to absorb spillovers associated with foreign direct investment (FDI). Migration between Southeast Asia and East Asia has contributed to the region's economic dynamism, and it has reduced poverty. However, each country has its own migration policies depending on its economy. For example, the East Asian countries have aimed at giving preference to certain groups of immigrant workers. Thus, each of these countries has different laws and immigration policies with regard to entry requirements from Southeast Asian member countries. There is little evidence to support the notion that any policy intervention has been effective in controlling the number of migrants or in managing migration in the desired direction. Therefore, policies vary toward whether a country is sending workers and/or receiving workers.

Table 6 Migration among Selected Countries in Southeast Asia, 2006

(Thousands)

Source	Destination						
	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Other destinations
Cambodia	-	2	7		-	232	
Indonesia	-	-	1,215	5	96	1	Gulf States, Brunei Darussalam
Lao PDR	1	-	-	-	n.a.	257	Australia, Europe, Japan, Republic of Korea, United States
Malaysia	1	-	-	-	994	3	Brunei Darussalam, Australia, United States
Myanmar	-	-	92	-	n.a.	1,382	Australia, Europe, Japan, Republic of Korea, United States
Philippines	1	-	353	-	136	3	Brunei Darussalam, Gulf States, United States, Europe
Singapore	1	-	87	-	-	2	Brunei Darussalam
Thailand	129	3	86	-	-	-	Brunei Darussalam, Taiwan (China), Japan, Israel
Vietnam	157	15	86	1	-	20	Japan, Republic of Korea

Sources: Malaysia Department of Statistics; Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA); Thailand Ministry of Labor; University of Sussex; ILO Plan of Action on Labour Migration in Asia-Pacific (unpublished, Bangkok, Dec. 2005); and World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/prospects/migrationandremittances>.

Migration Policy Responses to Each Economy

Labor market reforms have become a major policy focus in both East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. In many countries, the policies focus on the fundamental principles of human rights at work, particularly on labor discrimination, child labor and forced labor. Some countries have changed their labor laws in order to stimulate economic growth and trade objectives. Labor law reform is driven by increasing diversity of working arrangements and employment conditions; and fixed term, temporary, part-time employment; and the period for training. In other words, many countries are trying to find an effective balance between flexibility, stability and security in managing migrant workers. These countries also have to take into consideration the balance between economic security, social and health security and human rights security.

• Policies of East Asian Countries

The East Asian economies have fully recovered from the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The countries in this region once again have become high performers. Policies are designed essentially to deal with immigrants, not workers. The policies are strongly biased toward highly-skilled laborers to fill skill niches in service occupations regarded as unwanted by native workers.

Migrant flows are basically demand-driven as the domestic workforce is shrinking as a result of fewer children being born and the existing population aging. Domestic laborers are also reluctant to work in the “3-D

jobs” (dirty, dangerous and difficult). As a result, the demand for foreign workers should and will continue to grow in non-trade sectors and in large-scale industries and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The recent policy challenge for these East Asian countries is whether they can make their new reliance on foreign workers consistent with the priorities of national development policies and changing market conditions.

• Policies of Southeast Asian Countries

Unlike the East Asian countries, as development progresses, countries ultimately change from being net senders of workers to being net recipients of foreign workers, e.g., Malaysia and Thailand. These countries have experienced the presence of bottlenecks that block further economic development mainly as a result of the insufficiency of their infrastructure, their skilled and unskilled labor, and the failure of real sectors in restructuring. In contrast, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia have increased their emigration along with the improvement in prosperity (per capita) of their people. As a result, remittances form another way out of poverty, poor income distribution, and rural-urban biases (Go 2005; Nguyen 2005; Soeprbo 2005).

In ASEAN, Singapore is unique; it has a well-conceived and explicit policy on foreign labor. There is a balance between promoting economic competitiveness through foreign labor augmentation and protecting the jobs of its own citizens. Job creation in the private sector is designed for young residents and for retrenched older workers through FDI. The gap in excess demand is filled

by foreign labor (Yap 2005). Singapore has been a success story in terms of managing foreign workers at all levels.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study we provided an overview of the patterns and trends in the migration flow between Southeast Asian and East Asian countries. We also briefly reviewed the policies and programs of both the sending and the receiving countries. Even though our discussion of temporary migrant workers covers both highly-skilled and semi-skilled workers, it is quite clear that the sending countries have been increasingly integrated with the receiving countries. However, the size of the skilled migrant workforce is smaller compared with the movement of semi-skilled workers. With regard to the labor market impacts of foreign semi-skilled workers on the East Asian countries, such workers have created a lot of negative impacts for local workers. The migration policies of East Asian countries are in transition toward more open economies by introducing a work-permit system for temporary semi-skilled workers. Also, all countries are challenged by the growing problems of illegal workers and temporary-worker programs.

Therefore, if the desire is to promote more labor mobility in Asia and reap mutual benefits for all concerned, cooperation is needed in designing temporary labor policies which can minimize the adverse effects of temporary labor. Such policies would require good relationships between the sending and the receiving countries in order to ensure that hiring migrant workers is a “win-win” situation for all the countries concerned.

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