

# Life and Community of Cambodian Migrant Workers in Thai Society

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*Thailand is experiencing an increased demand for lower-skilled foreign labor in a range of industries and sectors of the expanding economy. A shortage of Thai workers willing to perform unskilled labor began to emerge in 1993, and foreign migrants were recruited to fill this gap. While the Thai economy has benefited from migrant labor, at the inter-personal level, low-skilled migrants are still marginalized by mainstream Thais, and there has been little cross-cultural integration. This qualitative study investigates the life and community of migrant workers from Cambodia working in Thailand. It documents the various socio-cultural and historical attributes that migrant workers bring with them, and the prospects for greater integration within Thai society. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, comprised of 8 migrant workers and 12 non-migrant workers. This study found that the key motivating force for migration was a long-lasting period of unemployment in Cambodia. Migrant workers attach importance to kinship, networks and community ties, but violence in their recent past greatly affects their interactions and ability to integrate with Thai society. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that employers of Cambodian migrant workers treat them fairly and make a greater effort to understand the context of their lives and culture, and how that carries over to the workplace.*

**Keywords:** migration, migration culture, migrant workers, integration, Khmer Rouge Regime

## Introduction

Since 1993, the demand in Thailand for low-skilled foreign labor has increased, across a range of industries and sectors (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2013). The Thai population is aging rapidly, which translates to a declining proportion of people in the working-age cohorts. In addition, due to increasing educational attainment, more Thais seek higher-skilled labor than in the past. The rather sharp difference in the level of development and economic wealth between Thailand and its lower-income neighbors (Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao PDR) is creating a magnetic force, pulling more and more young migrants to seek work in Thailand (IOM, 2010).

As of December 2014, nearly 1.2 million migrant workers had entered the Thai workforce through the nationality verification process and bi-lateral Memorandum of Understanding agreements, and were holding work permits (929,219 Burmese; 194,570 Cambodians; 53,840 Lao) (Office of Foreign Workers Administration, 2014). It has been estimated that the total number of documented and undocumented (i.e., illegal) migrant workers in Thailand actually is three to four million (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009), projected to climb to 5.36 million by 2025 (IOM & Asian Research Center for Migration, 2013). The only presumable

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factor that could reverse this trend is rapid development in the three sending countries, triggering a greater demand for labor there.

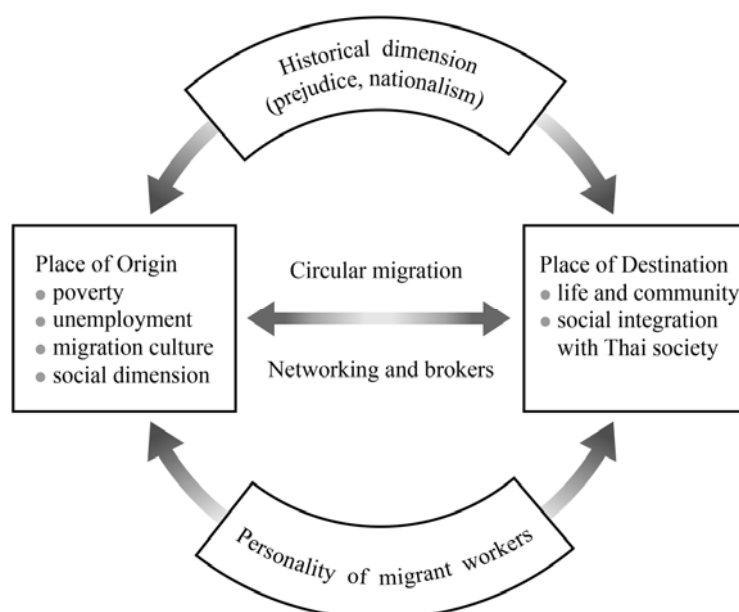
Regardless of future trends, migrant workers in Thailand are not being treated appropriately and, in some extreme cases, are exploited by employers who withhold wages, pay less than promised, coerce migrant workers into performing arduous work, deceive migrants into prostitution, and commit human trafficking (World Vision Foundation of Thailand, 2003). Indeed, the 2014 Trafficking in Persons report by the U.S. Department of State down-graded Thailand from Tier 2 Watch List status to Tier 3 status, the most unfavorable classification for human trafficking violations (U.S. Department of State, 2014). This status was maintained in the 2015 report.

This study explores the life and community of Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand through a historical and socio-cultural lens, and assesses the feasibility of integration of this sub-group into mainstream Thai society. Cambodian migrant workers were chosen as the focus of this study because of their similarities and unique frictions with Thailand. As the region prepares for the launch of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) at the end of 2015, bi-lateral relations and exchange will enter a new era. Thus, the Cambodia case is useful as a test of the ability of Thailand –and, in a broader sense, the AEC – to accommodate a large and increasing minority into mainstream society.

## Conceptual Framework

The place of origin of migrant workers helps to inform push and pull factors, networking and the evolving migration culture which Cohen (2004) defined as an everyday experience which rural migrants and their households choose to earn their living. The figure below depicts the conceptual framework of this research.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework of migration, historical and cultural dimensions and social integration of migrant workers.



## Methodology

Data for this qualitative study was collected through in-depth interviews with 20 key informants during a three-month period (November 2014-January 2015) in Bangkok and neighboring provinces. The selected migrant workers' worksites represent the construction sector, industrial factories and construction material manufacturing. Interviews were conducted with two groups of key informants. The first group included eight Cambodian migrant workers – four male and four female – who had been in Thailand for at least two years, were age 20 or older, and had a variety of experiences. The researcher coordinated with employers and personnel officers to gain permission to conduct the interviews. After receiving an orientation about the research objectives, all migrant workers provided informed, written consent to participate. Cambodian participants spoke and understood Thai, but a bilingual interpreter was also on hand if needed. The study was approved by IPSR-IRB, Mahidol University (approval number COA. No 2014/1-1-33).

The second group of key informants included academic experts, development workers from NGOs, employers of migrant workers and Thai workers. The researcher purposively selected academics and NGO staff who had experience with migrant labor to serve as “seed” respondents who then referred others (snowball sampling), yielding a total of six respondents. Four employers of migrant workers were selected to represent a range of sectors. The two Thai workers – one, a foreman; the other, a husband of a Cambodian – were included as relevant persons. The researcher applied data analysis methods based on grounded theory, which holds that analysis is a cumulative process that begins with the first case and ends at data saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In other words, when an additional case does not provide added value, then a sufficient amount of data has been collected for a complete analysis. Details of all informants are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1:** List of interviewed migrant workers and their characteristics

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Hometown	Education	Duration of stay in Thailand (years)	Occupation /kind of work	Reasons for being selected
1	Migrant	F	55	Battambang	Never attended school	8	Laborer	Lived in Khmer Rouge regime
2	Migrant	F	45	Battambang	Never attended school	2	Laborer	Able to explain Khmer culture
3	Migrant	F	35	Koh Loi	11 <sup>th</sup> grade	14	Laborer	Able to save money and loan to others at home
4	Migrant	M	31	Ta-kaew	11 <sup>th</sup> grade	15	Laborer	Has leadership character
5	Migrant	F	30	Pursat	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	13	Laborer	Witnessed sexual harassment
6	Migrant	M	30	Battambang	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	14	Laborer	Works as sub-contractor
7	Migrant	M	26	Siam-Reap	B.A.	2	Laborer	Obtained high level of education
8	Migrant	M	20	Battambang	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	5	Laborer	Experienced wage cheating by Thai employer

**Table 2:** List of non-migrant workers and their characteristics

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Hometown	Education	Occupation/ kind of work	Reasons for being selected
1	Non-migrant	M	70	Samut Prakarn	Never attended school	Owner of deep-sea fishing boats	Hires a large number of Khmer migrant workers
2	Non-migrant	M	65	Bangkok	M.A.	Owner of a factory	Owens a factory branch in Poi-pet
3	Non-migrant	M	61	Chantaburi	B.A.	Development worker	Teaches Thai to Khmer children in construction site
4	Non-migrant	M	60	Bangkok	B.A.	Manager	Works closely with Khmer laborers
5	Non-migrant	F	60	Bangkok	M.A.	Development worker	Works on trafficking legal issues
6	Non-migrant	F	59	Bangkok	M.A.	Development worker	Has good knowledge on Khmer language and culture
7	Non-migrant	F	50	Phnom Penh	M.A.	Development worker	Has knowledge on migrant labor and trafficking
8	Non-migrant	M	46	Surin	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	Foreman	Sub-contractor/has knowledge of employment system
9	Non-migrant	M	40	Samut Prakarn	B.A.	Worker	Married a Khmer woman
10	Non-migrant	M	34	Kampong- thom	D.Ed.	Public school teacher	Has good knowledge of Khmer history and curriculum
11	Non-migrant	F	30	Phrae	B.A.	Employer	Has experience hiring Khmer laborers
12	Non-migrant	M	25	Kampong- thom	M.A.	Development worker	Works on trafficking/ legal issues

It should be noted that the findings reported here are drawn from a qualitative study with a limited number of key informants, and that the selection of interviewed migrant workers (due to their long stay in Bangkok and their Thai language skills) may influence the findings on social integration. Therefore, any conclusions should be viewed with caution especially when generalizations are applied.

## Overview of Cambodia

Cambodia is a country of 181,035 square kilometers located in Southeast Asia. Cambodia's population is about 14.8 million, 85-90% of whom live in rural areas and work in agriculture. Approximately 90% of the population identifies as ethnic Khmer, speaks Khmer in the household and practices Theravada Buddhism. Cambodia shares land borders with Thailand, Vietnam and Lao PDR. (Mekong Migration Network (MMN) & Asian Migrant Centre (AMC), 2008).

Cambodia was once a powerful and advanced society, as witnessed by the construction of the complex temple city of Angkor Wat, built from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (UNESCO, n.d.).

After a series of sub-regional wars, Angkor fell to the Ayutthaya Kingdom. More recently, Cambodia was an Indochinese colony of France (1873-1953). After World War II, Cambodia achieved its independence from France but descended into protracted civil war from 1967 to 1975, when the Khmer Rouge took over the country. Khmer Rouge rule lasted until 1979, when the regime of Heng Samrin supported by Vietnam liberated Phnom Penh and other parts of the country. Nevertheless, factional strife continued until a UN peace-keeping force intervened in 1993 to arrange negotiations and oversee national elections. Currently, Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy with His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni as the reigning monarch and Hun Sen as Prime Minister (MMN & AMC, 2008).

Cambodians are a highly mobile people, given that a high proportion of the population is in the prime working age group. Over half (57%) of the country's migration is internal from rural to urban areas (especially to the capital city) while 13% of migration is rural-to-rural movement. Nearly one-third (30%) is international migration and, of those migrating abroad, over one-third (37%) travel to Thailand, 14% to Malaysia, and 3% to Korea. Internal migrants generally have higher educational attainment than international migrants, and nearly all migrants report some mental health issues, such as high stress (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Cambodia, 2014). International migrants remit approximately \$364 million in funds back to Cambodia each year. The median amount of money sent home by Cambodian migrants in Thailand between 2006-2007 was 20,000 baht (approximately \$650) (Renzenbrink, 2012).

### *Social Dimensions and Motivation to Migrate*

Poverty and lack of employment opportunities in Cambodia are the most important push factors leading to Cambodian migration. The migrant workers interviewed in this study indicated that an important push factor for migration is economic need and lack of job opportunities in Cambodia. This is combined with a pull factor of two-fold higher wages in Thailand for the same job. According to their work experiences, the legal minimum wage of 300 baht/day in Thailand is at least two times higher than the 130-150 baht/day equivalent in Cambodia.

Another pull factor is the shortage of lower-skilled laborers in Thailand. Decades of war in Cambodia have stifled socio-economic development compared to other countries in the region and the vast majority of the population is still agrarian (IOM, 2010). Most farmers do not own the land they use due to delays in undoing the abolishment of private land during the Khmer Rouge era. This severely limits the ability of farmers to prosper, and they have trouble purchasing even the most essential goods and services. Some farmers who had joined the Cambodian army were provided a piece of land after the war as promised by Hun Sen. But that is merely enough for subsistence rice farming, with little profit left over, if any. Phnom Penh is the most developed part of the country but manufacturing is still concentrated in the "light" industry sectors of textiles and shoe production. Many of the business owners are from countries outside Cambodia such as Singapore, China and Japan. Even with these industries, the factory capacity is inadequate to meet the demand and availability of young laborers. There is also a preference in light industry for female workers, and this leaves young males with limited employment options. Construction jobs are increasing, but many are filled by Vietnamese migrant workers with greater skill. Also, obtaining factory or construction jobs often depends on a person's network of relatives or connections. Those without connections or those who want to negotiate their salaries may

have trouble finding work. One key informant who worked in construction in Phnom Penh observed the following:

*Each morning you had to wait to hear who would be needed for the day's work. Some days there was no work, and the first jobs always went to the foreman's inner circle.*

(Migrant, age 30, laborer)

Thailand may be also a more attractive location for work since there is a better chance of having continuous employment throughout the year.

The emerging migration culture among young people is evident. When individuals see how their families are struggling to make ends meet, there is a strong motivation to do something to improve the welfare of their households. Even children in school think about dropping out to find work to help their parents. Thus, better wages and opportunities in Thailand beckon. Much of the cross-border travel is a form of chain migration since most people have a relative, neighbor, or acquaintance who has gone outside the country for work, and is sending back money. Younger generations witness this when migrant workers return to their home communities bearing signs of wealth – new clothes, electrical appliances, the latest cell phone, or a new motorcycle. Some migrant workers have saved enough to help their families build new houses. This has created a culture of migration in the minds of many Cambodian youth from lower-income families, even though not all migrant workers prosper. But their dreams override the risks.

Older male Cambodians experienced significant displacement from home and family due to war. This norm has been transferred, to some degree, to the current generation of working-age men. Parents actively encourage their children to migrate for better jobs and opportunities since they've lived through hardships and witnessed what the world has to offer first hand.

*Everyone in the village seems to have migrated for work somewhere else. The only ones left are the elderly and toddlers.*

(Non-migrant, age 34, public school teacher)

Networks and brokers facilitate migration. The decision to migrate is not always an individual gamble, but can be a family decision, especially for a married couple who wants to stay together. The ultimate destination for the migrant workers is often determined by an invitation to join a relative or friend. Others are recruited by employment agencies or brokers who help arrange travel and documentation (for both legal and illegal migration). Legal migration involves processing through Thai Immigration at an official border-crossing and then registration by the migrant worker's employer. For illegal migrant workers, there are numerous ways to cross the land and sea borders between Thailand and Cambodia. But the process is not always smooth, as explained by one female Cambodian migrant worker:

*The last time I crossed I had to go on foot through a forested area. Then, at the first meeting point, I was crammed into the back of a large pick-up truck with about 40 other illegals. If the vehicle fell over, many of us would have been killed or injured. At the next stop, we had to get off the truck and trek through more forest. I had no idea where we were. We waited in a group of about 100 other migrant workers. Finally, more pick-up trucks arrived to take us on the final leg of the trip, and we all split up in different directions.*

(Migrant, age 45, laborer)

Part of the deterrent to legal migration is the cost of processing a passport and visa (about 20,000 baht total). The nationality verification approach is time-consuming (3-6 months) and some of the migrant workers have no personal identification documentation (e.g., birth certificate). For these reasons, many migrant workers choose to enter Thailand illegally. Most interviewed migrants reported that the average cost of transport is 1,500-2,000 baht and the broker collects this as an advance from the employer who then deducts the cost from the migrant worker's monthly salary.

The pattern of the mobility is circular migration, meaning that migration is temporary and repeated. According to the migrant workers interviewed in this study, Thailand is a preferred destination for migrant workers because travel is convenient and it is possible to start work immediately after arrival, unlike Malaysia, Korea or Japan, where immigration systems are tighter and English language training is required. Despite the cultural and ethnic similarities between the two countries, the interviewed migrants believe that most Cambodian migrant workers do not intend to settle permanently in Thailand. Their primary goal is to help raise the economic status of their households or pay off family debts, and they will stay as long as they can save money. Many return home for significant family events (serious illness, marriage, merit-making) or important festivals, especially on their traditional new year festival called "*chol-cha-nam*," which falls during the Thai Songkran festival. The data collected from the migrant workers suggests that some who reach their savings goals return home, but then go back to Thailand if funds run low again. This is especially the case for migrant workers with dependents (e.g., young children or older relatives).

### *Impact of a Violent Past on the Cambodian Perspective*

Even though the majority of Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand are young and did not live through the wars and Khmer Rouge atrocities, the lingering effects of these traumas are passed through generations. There are conflicts between those who express pride versus those who feel humility and self-pity for the violent past. Cambodians are reminded of the glory of the Khmer Civilization and derive a sense of national pride in Angkor Wat, featured prominently on the Cambodian flag. But that pride in Khmer heritage is overshadowed by the present-day under-development of the nation, compared to most of its neighbors. This produces a psychological dissonance which is sometimes manifested in internal conflict. On the surface, Cambodian migrant workers may appear happy, healthy and humble, but this disguises a defiant arrogance, and reluctance to do or say anything that others could criticize. Some Cambodian migrant workers refuse to take jobs as domestic helpers since that places them in a lower status than Thais. One female academician described this dissonance as characteristic of an "impoverished gentry."

Cambodian society is quite diverse, of course, but there may be an undercurrent of a national inferiority complex, and migrant workers may bring this with them to Thailand. The humiliation they experienced at home for being poor and less educated has given them an extra level of determination to lift themselves and their families to a higher socioeconomic status. Still, many remain particularly sensitive to anything that might be perceived as disdainful of them as Cambodians.

At the same time, the Cambodian migrant workers have a survivor mentality without a long-term time horizon. That is, they focus on short-term welfare and problem solving. One development worker observed that the history of war has infused the culture and national

psyche with a drive to endure, and handle unpleasant circumstances in a dignified way. This also suggests that Cambodian migrant workers may be more tolerant and flexible in order to obtain and retain employment.

*I remember the time when Cambodia was still involved in war, and the bombs were exploding all around. But it was amazing how the villagers went on with wedding ceremonies, listening to the sound of explosions in one ear and the sound of wedding music in the other. It was as if there was no war going on.*

(Non-migrant, age 60, development worker)

Since migrant workers under age 40 were born after the Khmer Rouge took power, most have only heard about the atrocities as relayed by their elders but the horrific nature of that period remains a fresh wound as expressed in the words of one female migrant worker:

*I was about seven or eight years old during the Khmer Rouge reign. I remember hearing that they killed many people. Adults and youth were forced to work the fields and dredge canals. Parents were separated from their children. The crop harvests were all turned over to the Khmer Rouge. I feel sad because the Khmer killed each other.*

(Migrant, age 45, laborer)

The people who did not die during the Khmer Rouge rule learned how to be survivors, in a form of self-centered preservation because people could no longer trust others. There was a saying: "Plant a cotton tree in your mouth," which in Khmer meant, "stay mute."

*If we showed too much knowledge we would be killed. It was smarter to play dumb.*

(Migrant, age 55, laborer)

*The Khmer Rouge oppression actually forced us to become habitual liars, thieves, wary of others – even suspicious of relatives and family members. Children were taught to see their parents as thieves and to report on them. Everyone was in a constant state of fear and mistrust of others.*

(Non-migrant, age 34, public school teacher)

At the same time, a Thai participant in the study observed that the Cambodian nature was untrustworthy even before the Khmer Rouge, and that's the reason for the old Khmer saying:

*You cannot trust four things: the clouds (the sky), stars, mother, and wife. Even your mother is untrustworthy because she loves you so much she may put you in jeopardy.*

(Non-migrant, age 59, development worker)

### ***Nature of the Work and System of Employment***

At present, there are three systems of employing migrant workers: direct recruitment of work teams for fixed assignments, recruitment for fixed assignments by a broker and individual hires by the employer.



According to participants in this study, Cambodian migrant workers prefer being hired in work teams directly by the employer, such as for construction, tile work, masonry or painting. In this system, the employer sets the price for doing tile work for ten bathrooms, for example, at a cost of 3,000 baht per room. In this system, different work teams are hired at the same time to expedite completion. Often, the work teams are groups of five to ten members of a family. This system is ideal because it allows for independence. Workers do not have to be under the direct supervision of a boss and they can work at their own pace. Once they finish the assignment and get paid, they can then take one to two days off for rest. Since the team consists of family members, or kin, the payment is distributed equitably among the work team.

Some Thai employers with large projects (e.g., construction, rice packaging) might elect to pay a lump sum to a broker, who is then responsible for rounding up the migrant workers and managing the process through to completion. Depending on the size and nature of the assignment, there may be several layers of brokers and foremen. Higher levels of brokers are usually reserved for Thai nationals, and they can deal effectively with the Thai authorities. Foremen and supervisors are also usually Thais, in the words of one Thai key informant:

*The migrant workers make 300 baht a day while I make double that. But I need to take care of all the logistics of the assignment, including processing temporary work permits for the migrant workers. Sometimes, I am in debt because, after getting the work permit, the migrant workers flee to another work site and I cannot trace them.*

(Non-migrant, age 46, foreman)

In the past, Thai employers preferred the broker system since they did not want to deal with legal issues and disputes with the migrant workers or handle quarrels among the migrant workers. However, in recent years, brokers have become more demanding of the migrant workers and this has eroded worker morale, driving migrants to other work sites. Thus, when there is an urgent need, brokers are having trouble finding enough of the right migrant workers for the assignment, causing employers to have to recruit the migrant workers directly. In addition, some factory owners do not like to see migrant workers being exploited by the brokers. It is not uncommon for female migrant workers to have their sexual rights violated, as reported by one respondent who knows of a broker who has abused many female migrant workers:

*This guy gave the orders that, if he knocked on your door, you had to go with him, or else you would not have work the next day. Those who succumbed received an increase in daily wage from 300 to 500 baht. The elders told the young girls to put up with the abuse, save the money, and then they could return to their homes sooner.*

(Migrant, age 30, laborer)

Accordingly, in the past two to three years, more employers are hiring migrant workers directly and giving them positions in their companies. However, some brokers are fighting back by making threats to both the employers and the employees, saying they would notify the police that the employers were hiring illegal migrant workers. There are external pressures to treat the migrant workers more fairly through policies of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which list companies that are not certified for protecting the rights of workers, and this restricts their abilities to export. Overall, the elimination of the middle men has improved work conditions for migrant workers and resulted in more regular and

fair wages. Word spreads about companies that hire migrant workers directly and treat them well, and this means that those companies never have a shortage of job applicants. According to the manager respondent, the better morale of the workforce also translates into more efficient production and less absenteeism.

### *Exploitation of the Migrant Workers and Human Trafficking*

All of the key informants in this study were satisfied with their present employment. However, all migrant workers experienced incidents of hardship and exploitation by their employer or broker. Some migrant workers are not told in advance about the nature of the work they are being recruited for, the location, or the wage. A migrant worker respondent from Battambang was told he was needed to be a poultry butcher, but had no details about the nature of the factory. He assumed it was a job to chop up chicken parts for general markets.

*In fact, the work was much more physically demanding than I thought. The factory was kept very cold, about 12 degrees, and I fainted from the cold. Finally, I had to switch to another job. Now, my new job is very hot and in the sun. But I'll take the heat over the cold.*

(Migrant, age 20, laborer)

Another migrant worker was tricked into taking a job in Lao PDR:

*A Thai broker told me I could make 8,000 baht a month to raise ducks in Lao PDR. Once I got there, 2,000 baht was deducted for travel costs, and another 2,000 baht was cut from the promised salary. I decided to quit and called my son to pick me up. It cost 15,000 baht to get back home.*

(Migrant, age 55, laborer)

A construction worker respondent reported a time when she had completed an assignment, but the employer disappeared without paying her. Because she was an undocumented migrant worker, she did not dare to file a complaint, since she might be arrested and deported. Then she would have to spend money to re-enter Thailand.

*I've been cheated a number of times by employers who fail to make payments when the job is done. That is why I have had a hard time saving any money.*

(Migrant, age 45, laborer)

The Thai boat owner who was interviewed for this project said he never practiced or heard of cases of human trafficking for deep-sea fishing boat crews. It should be noted, though, that crews are often recruited by brokers, and boat owners might not be aware of what methods were used. Furthermore, because owners pay brokers in advance, they do not want to send crews back, even if they were illegally procured and transported. But the pay for work on fishing boats can be good, and migrant workers who do are able to remit significant sums back to their homes in Cambodia.

One non-migrant respondent owns deep-sea fishing boats with migrant-worker crews. He reported that, with the labor shortage becoming more severe, he has to offer more than minimum wage. However, he also has to pay his brokers in advance to procure the crews. When the day comes to go to sea, a broker may not always deliver the number of crew

members promised, and there is little he can do. Also, some brokers rotate migrant workers among boats to get duplicate procurement fees for the same crew.

*All of the boat owners are losing money these days. We have to pay for crews in advance, but have no guarantee of delivery. We are also accused [of exploiting] migrant workers but, in fact, it is the Cambodian brokers who are doing that. Not the Thais.*

(Non-migrant, age 70, owner of deep-sea fishing boats)

### ***Daily Life***

All of the migrant workers in this study cited the grinding poverty and lack of jobs in Cambodia as the principal motivation to migrate, endure, and save as much money as possible to take or send home. Their days mostly center around work, starting at 6 a.m. when they wake up and eat breakfast, which the married migrant workers usually prepare by themselves as a couple. Single migrant workers typically buy meals. In some work situations, migrant workers can return home for the noon meal. All the migrant workers interviewed seek overtime work opportunities to accumulate more income. When they return home, there is just enough time for the evening meal before bedtime.

On days off, the migrant workers said they stay at home and watch TV or listen to music. On pay days (usually every two weeks), male migrant workers tend to drink alcohol with their peers, while the female migrant workers prefer to go to the local temple to make merit. Despite these diversions, all the migrant workers seemed scrupulous about the need to save money and only spend on necessities. If they buy household items, they often choose second-hand goods in order to be frugal.

*We work harder than the money can compensate for. Thus, I don't want to waste a single baht. I feel pity for myself.*

(Migrant, age 31, laborer)

One employer of migrant workers observed that the single or younger migrant workers seem to be attracted to the latest fashions and electronics, such as mobile phones. Accordingly, they are less frugal and remit less money back to Cambodia.

### ***Network of Relatives in the Community***

Most of the migrant workers in this study are from rice farming families and, thus, still maintain a tight, extended family structure in their communities in Thailand. Most of the migrant workers came as a family (parents and children) or in groups of relatives or peers. These migrant kinship groups range from five persons up to as many as 50. In some extreme cases of chain migration, the entire village migrates to Thailand for work. When these groups hear about new job opportunities, they tend to go en masse. Even within a community of Cambodians, migrant workers tend to self-segregate and socialize mostly within their kinship group, and keep quietly to themselves. All the Cambodian migrant workers interviewed still maintain close ties with their relatives back home, and many have sent their young children to be cared for by their grandparents. This often increases the pressure to remit income and save for trips home to visit their children. Kinship groups tend to have informal leaders whom they respect and obey more than the Thai foreman. When

asked, the Thai employers in this study were not aware of this separate line of authority over their workforce.

If migrant workers are not satisfied with their work, they can appeal to the broker who brought them to Thailand, and ask to be re-assigned. Some brokers inform migrant workers of better-paying jobs and help them relocate. When migrant workers move as a group, though, it sometimes frustrates the Thai owners who do not understand the power of the Cambodian migrant workers kinship groups. The employers in this study explained that they feel hurt that, even though they treat and pay their Cambodian workers well, the migrants will abandon the work site en masse if their informal leader tells them to go elsewhere. It is as if the migrant workers are ungrateful for the support the employer has given them. In other words, it seems as if there is no company loyalty among the workforce. This makes the Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand appear to be a fickle group who make irrational decisions. Also, when there is a pressing need to return to Cambodia, no employer can talk them out of it.

In addition to their kinship networks, migrant workers also form new social networks through modern communication and the Internet (e.g., Facebook, LINE). They see this as an efficient way to keep in touch and reach out. One development worker respondent, who teaches Thai to migrant workers on construction sites, recalled the rumor that spread in May 2014 that the new military ruler was going to crack down on illegal Cambodian migrant workers. This rumor spread instantly due to the electronic communication linkages among the migrant workers and, thus, fueled a mass exodus. According to IOM, there were at least 246,000 Cambodians who fled the country in just 18 days between June 8-25 (Crothers, 2014).

*The rumor spread through the network of LINE users. At the site where I was, within five minutes of receiving news of the rumor starting, the migrant workers were packing their bags. Within an hour, pick-up trucks suddenly appeared to ferry them to the border. Several hundred migrant workers disappeared just like that.*

(Non-migrant, age 61, development worker)

### **Remittances**

Nearly all the migrant workers are able to save income and remit some of this back to Cambodia, from thousands to tens of thousands of baht per month. The remitted funds augment the subsistence living of the family members left behind, and are used to pay for child care, outstanding debts, medical expenses or new vehicles. They may also go towards repayment of the broker's fee. Some of the migrant workers with extra savings said they invest the funds in purchasing land back home, or extend loans to neighbors. However, these savings are not enough to enable the migrant workers to go into business for themselves. Furthermore, migrant workers spend about half their disposable income on essential daily living expenses in Thailand. Thus, they only manage to remit about 20% to 30% of their wages. This amount is even less for the younger cohort of migrant workers who spend more on non-essential activities and new, trendy items.

## *Integration*

Social integration in this research refers to acceptance by both parties, employers and migrant workers, for a cross-cultural exchange to learn from each other. Social integration is defined as a continuum approach ranging from the most to the least integrated level, as follows: (1) Assimilation: The migrant workers are willing to leave their home culture behind and fully adopt the cultural practices of the employer. (This is the highest level of integration); (2) Integration: Both parties accept certain differences but continue to learn from each other on a mutual basis; (3) Multiculturalism: Each party still adheres closely to their respective home cultures and does not interfere with each other's practices; and (4) Segregation: Each party adheres closely to their respective home cultures and physically separate themselves from each other (IOM, 2015). It should be mentioned here that the selection of the interviewed migrants may have caused some bias on the finding on integration because these selected migrants live in Bangkok and its vicinity, and are fairly fluent in Thai language. Thus, their integration may advance their counterpart who live close to the Cambodian border and have shorter-term stay or connection with the Thais.

### *Integration by the Cambodian Migrant Workers*

In general, any migrant must make certain adjustments when settling in another country. Similarities between Thailand and Cambodia make this easier than for most other migrant workers from low-income countries (e.g., similar geography and climate, rice-based diet, religion). The languages barrier may be an initial challenge to overcome. But after three to six months, many of the migrant workers said they can speak and understand Thai, while it takes them about one to two years to become functionally literate. Most of the migrant workers also said they study Thai on their own and ask for help from more fluent peers when learning new vocabulary.

On the surface, the Cambodian migrant workers interviewed have a positive view of Thais and Thailand, and believe that the average Thai is a kind person. Cambodians admire Thailand for its relative prosperity and natural beauty. On the negative side, Cambodians feel that Thais can be a bit haughty when interacting with them and, more generally, that Thai men are unfaithful to their wives. Thus, single female migrant workers would not like to marry a Thai man out of fear of being disrespected.

While most of the migrant workers in this study were farmers with low educational attainment, they could all describe, with obvious pride, the glory of the Angkor Empire. However, they have also learned about the history of war between the two countries and, as a result, avoid discussing politics with Thais. In some cases, they cannot avoid the impact of disputes, such as the current controversy over Khao Phra Viharn temple, which straddles the Thai-Cambodian border. Some migrant workers were kicked out of their dormitory by the Thai owner when the temple issue was seriously taken by the Thai public.

*They just kicked us out by saying we were Cambodian and couldn't live there anymore. At that time I was paranoid about going out in public and felt that I was being stared at in hostile ways.*

(Migrant, age 30, laborer)

*Our history tells us that Thailand has taken advantage of our country. But I dare not discuss this with Thais because I am in an inferior position here as a foreigner.*

(Non-migrant, age 34, public school teacher)

In the view of the employers, the Cambodian migrant workers seem impressionable, and comply easily with requests. At the same time, they are sensitive to criticism based on nationality or cultural differences, and are suspicious of being exploited. One migrant worker described, almost in tears, how one employer promised to treat migrant workers equally, but then made the Cambodian workers wear a different color work shirt from the Thai workers. The unsympathetic employer defended the practice saying it was about workforce management and not discrimination. Few of the migrant workers reported developing close friendships with other Thais, even co-workers. For their part, the Thais did not reach out to the Cambodians either.

### *Integration with Thais*

Thai employers seem to be more concerned about meeting production quotas than understanding the culture and sensitivities of their migrant workers. This is especially apparent in their unwillingness to learn basic Khmer. A few employers are taking more interest in the language and culture of their Cambodian workers, however. They are concerned about labor shortages, they say, since they will not consider other migrant communities such as the Rohingya or Bangladesh migrant workers due to even greater cultural and linguistic differences. The Thai employers in this study recognize the diligence, endurance and easy compliance of the Cambodian migrant workers. But they observed that the migrant workers do not talk to them much and, thus, the employer does not know what they are thinking or feeling. Some employers stereotype the Cambodians, saying they are not good at numbers, for instance, or they prefer certain kinds of work.

*Of all the different nationalities of migrant workers I've hired, the Cambodian are the best because of their willingness to endure tough working conditions, their hard-working nature, tolerance, compliance, focus on saving money, and avoiding distractions.*

(Non-migrant, age 70, owner of deep-sea fishing boats)

The biggest concern of employers about the Cambodian migrant workers is their tendency to leave abruptly, en masse, to go to other work sites, without giving notice to the employer. This happens even when the difference in pay at the new site is only slightly better, and an amount the employer could have agreed to meet.

*Sometimes, they hear of work that pays only 5 or 10 baht a day better and then walk out. If they told me about it, and it was true, then we could work out a deal. Good labor is hard to find.*

(Non-migrant, age 46, foreman)

In fact, the real reason for the migrant workers' exodus is not always because of higher wages, but often due to the influences of family members, informal leaders or brokers. The employers do not understand these factors because they ignore the cultural sensitivities and historical dimensions causing migrant workers to behave in a certain way. The employers stereotype the Cambodian migrant workers as easily offended or paranoid about

exploitation, even by their own countrymen. They feel the migrant workers are always looking for signs of discrimination or unequal treatment, and will complain to the employer of the slightest incident that appears unjust. For example, if Thai workers are provided fried rice for lunch, then all workers should get the same menu. If the award for worker excellence is an electric fan, then it must be the same for everyone, and not an iron or other appliance for Cambodian workers, even if the baht value is the same.

One Thai academic felt that, historically, Thailand has generally pursued an accommodation and harmonization policy when dealing with other cultures. This is especially apparent in how the Chinese have been so peacefully absorbed into Thai society and the economy, in contrast to the experience of some other countries in Southeast Asia.

One development worker observed that Thai employers need to improve their attitudes and understanding of the migrant workers in order to “view them as persons of equal humanity and not just as peons.” When that shift occurs, then fair treatment of the migrant workers will happen naturally along with smoother socialization of the non-Thais. But, based on the interviews conducted for this study, these changes rank low on the list of priorities of today’s employers of migrant workers.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

These days, a major concern of Thai employers is the upcoming shortage of low-skilled labor due to the return of Cambodian migrant workers to work in the expanding industrial sector in their home country. But as long as the supply for labor in Cambodia exceeds the demand, the excess migrant workers will first seek work in Thailand, especially younger cohorts. As more and more Cambodians migrate for work or have a relative or acquaintance who is a migrant worker, it is possible that a migration culture will emerge among the younger generation, as has happened in other societies such as the Philippines and Mexico (Cohen, 2004). The findings from the PHAMIT 2 survey (Chamrathirong, Wathinee, Chamchan, Holomyong & Apipornchaisakul, 2012) also confirmed that the migration flow will continue. There are still more newcomers whose main objective is to find employment and, with strong support from their families and established networks in Thailand, their duration of stay will last for several years.

Most of the Cambodian migrant workers do not have much potential for upward social mobility. Although nearly all of them can send money home as remittance, most of the money is spent on the family’s subsistence. The similar findings on remittances (Jampaklay & Kittisuksathit, 2009) revealed that nearly 90% of migrants in their study said remittance was used for daily expenses, followed by health care, household appliances and education, with only 30% of them spent for income-generating activities. Ultimately, then, migration only helps to achieve marginal improvements in their household situations. Even when they migrate to Phnom Penh, there is no socioeconomic ladder for them to climb, and so the urban areas become “cities of peasants” (Roberts, 1995). If upward mobility is still a challenge for the lower-skilled Thais in their own country, it is even more daunting for the foreign migrant workers. Thus, this pattern of low-income labor stagnation is likely to continue for some time.

The social integration of the migrant workers and the Thais appears to be at the multiculturalism stage in which Thais and Cambodians practice their own culture without interfering with each other. However it is possible to reach the integration stage in the near

future. Thai employers value Cambodian migrant workers, particularly for their endurance and work ethic. Difficulties arise, however, related to the trauma of their violent past. If Thai employers acknowledge these issues and are careful to ensure treatment equal to that of Thai employees (in the same positions), Cambodian migrant workers could more fully join Thai society in the years ahead. The social integration of Asian migrants in Western countries is even more of a challenge because of the greater disparities in culture and language, with serious friction among ethnic groups and political factions (IOM, 2015).

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