The Impact of Overseas Labour Migration on Rural Thailand: Regional, Community and Individual Dimensions

Huw Jones*‡ and Tieng Pardthaisong†

*Department of Geography, University of Dundee, Dundee DD1 4HN, UK; †Department of Community Medicine, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Abstract — The impact of international labour migration on rural areas of origin in less developed countries has been extensively studied in the context of the well-established, regional, labour-market systems focused on Western Europe, North America and the Middle East. There is little comparable research on the most recent international-migration system to emerge, that founded on the appreciable economic and demographic inequalities within Eastern Asia. This paper provides a case study of the impact at origin of recent labour migration from rural Thailand to East Asian destinations. It does so through survey information on 63 villages and detailed biographic interviews with recently returned workers. It is concluded that work abroad is regarded by migrants as a strategy of life support; it is sometimes life-enhancing, but only rarely life-changing. © 1998 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Outward migration is partly a cause, but more particularly an effect, of structural transformation in the rural areas of less developed countries. Such migration may be national or international, permanent or temporary, and in the latter case a one-off occurrence or, more commonly, repetitive and cyclical in the form of circulation (Prothero and Chapman, 1985). This paper focuses on one particular form of international migration, contract migration, in which individual migrants, unaccompanied by family, are hired for a specific job for a fixed period of time abroad. The paper considers the role and impact of such migration through a case study in rural Thailand, adopting regional, local community and individual scales of analysis.

Except for the most highly skilled migration, there has been a marked tendency for international, migrant-labour systems to take the form of regional networks linking labour-deficit economies at the core of each system to their much poorer, labour-surplus peripheries (Fawcett, 1989; Kritz and Zlotnik, 1992). Thus the United States has been linked in this way to Central America (Durand and Massey, 1992); north-western Europe to southern Europe, Turkey and North Africa (Salt and Clout, 1976; Seers et al., 1979); and the oil-rich Gulf states to Egypt, Yemen, Jordan and the Indian sub-continent (Birks et al., 1986; Arnold and Shah, 1986). Most recently, national economic and demographic inequalities within Eastern Asia have led to the rapid emergence of a new regional system, with Japan, the oil-rich state of Brunei and the former NICs (the newly industrialising countries of Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea that are now moving rapidly to service-dominated economies and off-shore production) drawing in migrant labour from Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, China, Vietnam and the Philippines (OECD, 1996; Jones and Findlay, 1998).

In the case of the well-established European, North American and Middle Eastern labour-market systems, the developmental impact of such labour
migration on the rural areas of origin has been extensively studied through a plethora of local case studies, focusing particularly on the use of migrant remittances. One might expect positive evaluations, since labour-export policies have often been promoted by governments as part of national development strategies, and since labour migration can be expected to enhance the financial resources of local communities and the security of households by diversifying income and spreading risk. However, the great majority of studies (synthesised by, for example, Connell et al., 1976; Rempel and Lobdell, 1978; Connell, 1981; King, 1986; Lewis, 1986; Shrestha, 1988) emphasise that while many return migrants benefit materially, they are only rarely bearers of initiative and generators of productive investment and employment in their home communities. It is widely alleged that their prime interest on return is to enhance their social status by disdaining manual work, by early retirement, by conspicuous consumption on a new house, car and other luxury goods, or by taking over a small service establishment like a bar or taxi business; that the labour lost in migration undermines the sustainability of the local agricultural economy; and that inequalities within communities are exacerbated. Such studies often conclude, in line with dependency theory (Frank, 1969), that labour migration reinforces the very conditions that promoted migration in the first place.

More recent overall assessments have been rather more balanced (Rigg, 1989a; Durand and Massey, 1992) and, indeed, positive (Taylor et al., 1996; Skeldon, 1997). These suggest that there is often an implicit ideological assumption in many case studies that a sustainable rural society must be based above all on the maintenance of the traditional farming economy; and that by adopting this perspective, analysts have undervalued, and sometimes ignored, the local multiplier effects of remittances allegedly 'dissipated' on consumption. Such perspectives often ignore the very real constraints imposed on productive agricultural investment in some areas by difficult environmental conditions (Rigg, 1985) or by lack of well-developed markets, public services and infrastructure (Grindle, 1988). Moreover, although there are significant differences between migrants and non-migrants in the initial stages of labour migration, which remittances then exacerbate, these inequalities narrow over time as access to migration opportunities develops more widely in the community (Massey et al., 1987).

These findings are from studies of international migration in the well-established, labour-market systems focused above all on Europe, North America and the Middle East. There are few equivalent studies from the most recent, and in many ways currently the most active, regional system linking East Asian origins and destinations, which has emerged as an integrated system only within the last 10 years. Thus in the important global overview of Taylor et al. (1996) on the impact of international migration on sending communities, only one of the 107 cited studies focuses on movements to Japan and the Asian NICs. Similarly, Go (1994) (p. 205) states that 'Asia has emerged as an increasingly important destination for Filipino workers... Little is known, however, regarding the phenomenon. To date, no systematic study has focused on international contract labour migration from the Philippines to other Asian countries.'

How comparable the East Asian migration system is to the earlier established systems, and therefore the extent to which one might expect a similar impact on rural origins, is debatable. There are particular similarities to the Middle Eastern system, in that most of the destination countries have been able to maintain a rotational flow of workers, preventing significant settlement and family reunion. This is despite, arguably, cultural affinities between many of the Asian origins and destinations and the absence of any 'visible minority' problem at destination. A distinctive feature of the East Asian system is that some countries, notably Malaysia and Thailand, are both significant senders and receivers of migrant labour, reflecting both the rapid pace of economic transformation and its spatial and sectoral variability within countries. Thus, while the impact of labour migration on rural areas has been extensively studied world-wide, there are particular features of the recently emerged East Asian system that warrant further case studies in this region. Our paper provides such a study based on survey work in rural Thailand. To put this work in context, it is necessary to outline the national and regional pattern of labour migration from Thailand.

Labour migration from Thailand

Permanent or long-term emigration has been much less from Thailand than from several Asian countries with stronger political, linguistic or cultural links to those Western countries which maintain immigrant-settlement policies. The Philippines, for example, has provided about 85,000 'settlers' per year in the 1990s to the United States, Canada and Australia, compared with Thailand's 8000 (annual series: US Immigration and Naturalisation Service, Statistical Yearbook; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Statistics; Department of Immigration and Multicultural
Temporary labour migration overseas, on the other hand, has been prominent in Thailand since the emergence of the Middle Eastern labour market following the oil price hikes of the mid-1970s. Such migration was strongly promoted by the Thai government in a series of five-year National Development Plans in the 1970s and 1980s. Complementary to the longer-term impact of family planning policies, labour migration overseas has been seen as immediately reducing unemployment and underemployment, defusing social and political protest, and earning valuable foreign exchange. The compromised human rights of migrant workers have been rationalised on the basis that such migration is a necessary, but temporary, feature of economic transformation. The prime role of the Thai government in such migration — as too in the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka — has been to negotiate abroad for labour-market shares and to regulate migration through the licensing and bonding of recruitment agencies, the setting of fees, and the negotiation of model contracts. But the recruitment and dispatch of workers is controlled, as elsewhere in the region, by private recruitment agencies. The role of such agencies (Spaan, 1994; Martin, 1996; Jones and Pardthaisong, 1997) is particularly powerful whenever, as in the Middle East and Eastern Asia, migrant workers are prevented from settling, so that there is continual return and replenishment of workers.

The overall development of Thai labour migration, at a national level, has been described elsewhere (Tingsabadh, 1994; Pongsapich, 1995; Sussangkarn, 1996), but can be summarised here through the migration data provided in Table 1. These data exclude a substantial, but unknown, number of undocumented migrants who are prepared to trade vulnerability and exploitation against lower costs, bureaucratic simplicity and speed of migration. With this caveat, Table 1 indicates clearly the switch in destinations of Thai migrant workers in the late 1980s and the 1990s from the Middle East to Eastern Asia. The rundown to the Middle East reflects partly the substantial, although temporary, disruption of the 1990–91 Gulf War, but more particularly a major diplomatic crisis brought on by accusations of jewellery thefts from, and murders of, high-ranking Saudi officials by Thai nationals. In addition, labour demand in the Middle East has moved away from the male construction workers that Thailand had traditionally supplied, towards female service and household workers more commonly recruited in the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The remaining flow of Thai workers to the region is largely to Israel, where Thais have been prominent among those brought in to replace Palestinian labour since 1993.

At the very same time, there has been a rapid growth in demand for foreign labour from the more developed economies of Eastern Asia. This is exemplified by Taiwan allowing unskilled foreign workers to be recruited legally for the first time in 1989, when its most urgent labour need was for construction workers on key national infrastructure projects — the very labour that Thailand had formerly provided for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, often as employees of Taiwanese construction companies. Thus in the three-year period to December 1996, Taiwan was the destination for 54% of the 706,000 labour migrants sent officially from Thailand; while Thais secured a remarkable 66% of the 310,000 foreign worker permits valid in Taiwan in December 1995 (Tsay, 1995). The other major destinations of documented Thai workers over the 1993–96 period have been, in order, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan and Hong Kong.

The regional financial crisis of 1997–98 has certainly affected international migration to and from Thailand. On the one hand, the government in Thailand (as in Malaysia) has felt it politically expedient, at a time of economic stagnation and growing unemployment, to be seen to be expelling tens of thousands of unauthorised foreign workers. At the same time, there have been considerably enhanced efforts by the Thai government to persuade other countries to take more Thai workers. Taiwan has been a particular target, reflecting the already strong migrant-labour linkages between the two countries, but also Taiwan’s position as one of the few East Asian economies relatively sheltered from the regional crisis. However, the most powerful impact of the crisis on international migration streams within the region will be to increase the number and proportion of illegal and/or undocumented migrant workers, since many of the East Asian economies

Table 1. Thai overseas contract workers (in thousands) processed by Thai labour authorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>To Middle East</th>
<th>To Eastern Asia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Pongsapich (1995); Annual reports of Thai Government Department of Labour.
have become structurally dependent on foreign labour for particular categories of work, regardless of their governments' restrictive attitudes and policies towards immigration.

Regional distribution of labour migration

In the early phases of labour migration, it has often been the more developed parts of less developed countries that have provided most migrants for work abroad. This reflects the initial need for an awareness of overseas opportunities and for sufficient capital to finance any migration. In Thailand, however, some of the more peripheral rural areas in the Northeastern and Northern regions led the way in the build up of labour migration overseas in the 1970s, with a major instigating role being played by the American airbases and associated road systems constructed there during the Vietnam War. This activity stimulated the early development in these areas of a cash economy and consumerism, provided better access to the Bangkok-based recruitment agencies, and established the initial links to the Middle Eastern labour market through those international construction companies with contracts at that time in Thailand (Rigg, 1989b; Singhanetra-Renard, 1992).

As Thai labour migration overseas developed, it retained its heavy focus on the Northeastern and Northern regions — both in absolute numbers (the two regions normally account for over 80% of all registered labour migrants from Thailand) and rates of incidence (Fig. 1). This regional concentration reflects the marked sectoral and spatial dualism in the development of the Thai economy in recent decades (Parnwell and Arghiros, 1996). While manufacturing and service activities have expanded considerably in employment levels and income rewards in Greater Bangkok and adjacent parts of the Central region, the wider agricultural economy has been starved of public investment, compromised by government pricing policies for agricultural inputs and outputs, and exposed in large areas of the North East to environmental marginality (Parnwell, 1988; Hirsch, 1990). Table 2 indicates clearly the continuing disadvantage of the Northern and especially the Northeastern regions on conventional measures of living standards.

Local survey methodology

Fieldwork was conducted by us in 1995–96 to understand better the detailed mechanisms and impacts involved in linking rural areas of Thailand to labour markets in other East Asian countries. The recruitment mechanisms are reported elsewhere (Jones and Pardthaisong, 1997), so that this paper focuses on the local developmental impacts.

A conventional method in such fieldwork is the use of household surveys. However, given the limit to the number of interviews manageable in most research projects, the information collected in this way may well only be representative of a very small number of villages, so that the findings cannot be generalised with any confidence to a wider population. The only study in Thailand of returned overseas migrants covering a large number of locations is that of Pongsapich (1986), but it deals exclusively with returnees from the Middle East. The other relevant studies (ESCAP, 1986; Rigg, 1989b; Poapongsakorn and Sangthanapurk, 1989; Gullaprawit, 1991; Singhanetra-Renard, 1992) all focus on just two to six villages apiece. This is why we have preferred to use a less intensive, but more geographically widespread, method of information gathering.

Six clusters of 10–13 villages (each village typically containing 150–250 households) were chosen from different parts of the Northern and Northeastern regions. Five of the clusters are in three provinces with high, but not the highest, rates of migration overseas (Buriram, Lampang and Sukhotai; see Fig. 1). The sixth cluster was selected from a border province (Chiang Rai) in order to monitor the possible impact of replacement labour from adjacent Burma and Laos. Five of the clusters are in rural areas outside the commuting range of provincial cities, so that the 1990 census recorded between 60% and 75% of the households in their administrative districts (amphoe) as agricultural households. The remaining cluster is nearer to an urban centre, Lampang, so that the equivalent proportion there was 50%.

In each of the 63 selected villages, a common structured interview was conducted by a local health officer with a knowledgeable key-contact, invariably the headman but sometimes the deputy. These elected village leaders have a remarkably detailed knowledge of all families in their village, attested by their key role in data gathering in other research investigations in rural Thailand (e.g. Funahashi, 1996). Their knowledge of work abroad is especially detailed, since it is common practice for agents to retain headmen as recruitment intermediaries, for which a commission of about US $40 per head is usually paid. The survey information was supplemented by individual biographies obtained from detailed interviews conducted by us in the same field areas with two registered (i.e. legal) main agents, six
sub-agents (one registered and five illegal), and 22 recently returned workers from East Asian countries (six from Japan, five each from Taiwan and Hong Kong, four from Singapore, and one each from Brunei and Malaysia). Not a single interview with village leaders, agents or migrants was refused, but no claims can be made for regional, let alone national, representativeness. The purpose of the interviews was simply to understand better the micro-level processes and impacts involved in overseas migration.

Survey results

Migration levels and directions

The key contacts were asked to estimate the percentage of households in their village that had personal experience of working abroad. Estimates were based on a 'census', by memory, of each household in the village, with the key contact often calling on family and friends to fill in gaps of knowledge.

Figure 1. Provincial rates of Thai labour migration abroad. The number of registered workers sent abroad by authorised recruitment agencies in 1994 and 1995 is shown per 1000 of the 1990 provincial population. Provinces in which survey sites are located are numbered: 1 Lampang, 2 Sukhotai, 3 Chiang Rai, 4 Buriram.

Sources: unpublished tabulations provided by Government of Thailand, Overseas Employment Administration Office.

Notes:

(1) Recruitment agencies sent 64.4% of the officially registered workers going abroad in 1994 and 1995. The remaining 35.6% comprised those workers sent directly by employers or the Thai Department of Labour, and those who made their own arrangements; there are no data available on the provincial origin of these groups.

(2) The data may well exaggerate the concentration of labour migration from the peripheral rural regions, since internal migrants to Bangkok and other cities may give their registration residence on moving abroad as their community of origin (Fulfer et al., 1990).

(3) The Southern (peninsular) Region of Thailand is not shown. It has no authorised recruitment agencies, and its provincial migration rates comparable to those shown in the figure are all less than 1 per 1000.
Table 2. Selected measures of living standards, regions of Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greater Bangkok</th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>Southern</th>
<th>Northern</th>
<th>Northeastern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monthly income (baht) per household, 1994</td>
<td>16,543</td>
<td>8776</td>
<td>8065</td>
<td>6267</td>
<td>5685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of households with monthly income &lt; 3000 baht, 1994</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of labour force in agriculture, 1992</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality rate (per 1000), 1991</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of households with colour tv, 1992</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of households with inside piped water, 1992</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3 indicates significant differences between the six clusters, ranging from every village in Pudthaisong (in the Northeastern region) having a majority of households with overseas experience, to nearly every village in Chiang Saen (on the Laos border of the Northern region) having less than 20% of its households in this category. Less predictably, although as observed elsewhere in Northeastern Thailand (Rigg, 1989b; Singhanetra-Renard, 1992), there are often appreciable differences between villages in the same cluster, as indicated in Table 3 by the data for Hangchat/Kokha, Thoen and, above all, Si Satchanali. While this local variability in labour migration may relate to differences in agricultural potential and livelihood opportunities, it is much more likely to reflect local concentrations and continuities in information networks. Thus, in particular villages, a migration culture is established by early, successful, but randomly distributed, migration experience being reinforced through the relationships forged by agents with returned workers and local patrons like village headmen; while in some villages, but certainly not all, the more entrepreneurial returned workers graduated from providing informal advice on migration opportunities to supplying a commercial service as migration sub-agents themselves.

In the majority of villages (37 out of 63) the period during which the first villager worked overseas was 1976–79, reflecting the take-off at that time of labour demand in the Middle East. The more isolated, northern border area of Chiang Saen is distinctive in that six of its villages initiated such experience only after 1983. The late establishment of networks in this area has clearly led to its lower contemporary rates of outflow: only in the two villages of the cluster where the first villager went overseas for work in the 1970s does the percentage of households with overseas work experience currently exceed 20%.

Table 3. Numbers of villages with particular percentages of their households having a member who has worked abroad at any time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Pudthaisong (Buriram)</th>
<th>Hangchat/Ko Kha (Lampang)</th>
<th>Thoen (Lampang)</th>
<th>Thung Saliem (Sukhothai)</th>
<th>Si Satchanali (Sukhothai)</th>
<th>Chiang Saen (Chiang Rai)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–19</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–39</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–59</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–79</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relative importance in the mid-1990s of international migration, on the one hand, and internal migration to Bangkok and the rest of Thailand, on the other, is shown in Table 4. While the two migration streams reveal some compatibility, in so far as there is a clear gradient from high migration in Pudthaisong to low migration in Chiang Saen, there is also evidence in two of the clusters of a marked specialisation or substitution effect. Thus, Thung Saliem and Si Satchanali reveal low migration rates overseas but very high rates to the rest of Thailand; this is related possibly to geographical location, with particular ease of access to the Bangkok labour market from these areas, but more probably to local traditions in migration networks.

Respondents were asked to rank destination countries in order of importance (up to 6). Taiwan was the leading destination for 51 villages and was ranked by 58 in all. The leading male occupation there was split almost exactly between construction (30) and manufacturing (28); for females it was overwhelmingly manufacturing, especially textiles. The following countries were also ranked: Singapore...
Table 4. Numbers of villages with particular percentages of their households having a member who has worked abroad in the last 12 months: and, in parentheses, those with a member who has worked elsewhere in Thailand in the last 12 months, excluding commuting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Pudthaisong</th>
<th>Hangchat/Ko Kha</th>
<th>Thoen</th>
<th>Thung Saliem</th>
<th>Si Satchanali</th>
<th>Chiang Saen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>2 (--;)</td>
<td>8 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-14</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>4 (5)</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
<td>7 (1)</td>
<td>4 (--;)</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-35</td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>-- (2)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>-- (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35+</td>
<td>3 (10)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>-- (7)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>-- (--)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(37 times), Arab countries (30), Brunei (28), Japan (24), Israel (15), Hong Kong (5), Malaysia (5) and Korea (4). The diversity of pattern implied by these data reflects again specialisation based on localised information and recruitment networks.

Types of migrant

While most of Thailand's migrant workers come from its poorest regions, they are not from their poorest people, largely because of the high fee charged by agencies for job placement abroad. The fee differentials by country, as reported by our local respondents for the five leading destinations (Table 5), largely reflect the wage differentials between Thailand and the countries of destination, so that the fee is less a measure of recruitment costs than one of surplus value produced by the worker abroad.

The payment of the agency fee involves a substantial 'up front' investment by the worker; in the case of Taiwan, for example, the fee is equivalent to almost two years pay for an unskilled worker in Thailand. Prospective migrant workers are dependent, therefore, on substantial savings of their own or their relatives, or on being able to offer land deeds as collateral to secure loans from banks or moneylenders. Estimates by the key contacts indicate that while the proportion of the fee provided by the worker and relatives has remained broadly the same in the last 10 years (15–20%), the proportion provided by local moneylenders has dropped from 70% to 15% and that by banks has risen from less than 10% to some 65%. This change reflects the way in which banks have vigorously pursued migrant business by establishing branches in rural areas and undercutting the exorbitant rates traditionally charged by local moneylenders (often 5% per month). The size of the recruitment fee has become an even more crucial financial consideration for prospective workers as the rewards of foreign work (income minus fee) have generally been falling in the last decade, reflecting the loss of the more lucrative work in the Middle East and the growing 'price' competition with other regional labour suppliers for work in Eastern Asia. Our interviews suggest that poorer people have restricted options for working abroad, since the lower fees that they can afford are inevitably accompanied by higher risk and often illegal movement and work status.

The key contacts reported almost universally that the dominant group of overseas workers comprised married, male farmers or skilled workers like mechanics, aged 25–40. This suggests that farm labourers and other unskilled workers were often unable to raise the necessary fees, and that overseas migration was part of a risk-distributing and capital-accumulating strategy adopted by families, rather than a speculative adventure by single young people in their teens and early 20s. This is further confirmed by the very low proportion of overseas workers that fail to return to their village. In only two of the 63 villages was this proportion estimated at over 5%.

Table 5. Typical fees charged by agencies for sending Thai male workers to selected countries, 1995–96

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>US $</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>2200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>3400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors' fieldwork.

*1995–96 exchange rate.

Impact on community

The impact of overseas work will be assessed, first, for the local communities, and then for the 22 interviewed migrants. The community impact was evaluated by the key contacts as overwhelmingly positive. After a full exploration in the interviews of the various economic and social dimensions of impact,
respondents were asked to assess, overall, whether working abroad had brought mainly advantages to the village, mainly problems, or an even mix of both. As many as 53 opted for ‘mainly advantages’, while only one indicated ‘mainly problems’ and 10 ‘an even mix of both’. To some extent, these results reflect the reduced levels of cheating of prospective migrants from the quite high levels of the 1980s reported by Singhanetra-Renard (1992) (p. 199) and Pong sapich (1995) (p. 60). Fraud by agents, not simply excessive commission, has invariably accompanied the migrant recruitment process throughout Eastern Asia, given the convention of payment well before departure, the physical distance between migrant origin and destination, and the social distance between unsophisticated rural workers and the hierarchy of agents and employers. However, in our survey, 36 of the 63 key contacts estimated that under 5% of deals with agents now fail (in the sense that workers lose money), and only 10 reported levels exceeding 20% (mostly associated with one agency in the Buriram field area). They explained this improvement from the 1980s in terms of better-educated workers, government-provided information on recruitment practices and pitfalls, and the growing migration experience in the community. In addition, most villagers now have access to local agents, rather than having to rely, as in the past, on visits from agents based elsewhere, often in Bangkok, who could not easily be traced or pressurised in the event of fraud.

The immediate impact of remitted income from overseas work is shown in the overall rankings provided by key contacts for the use of such income in their village. Repayment of debt (incurred largely in raising the agency fee) was ranked first, followed in order by building a new house, buying a car, purchasing household goods, buying land, supporting education of children, and starting a business. The so-called productive types of investment in this list clearly rank well below the types of consumption expenditure that can often enhance the prestige of the migrant’s family in the village. It is not coincidental that a substantial number of our key contacts (29 of the 63) had themselves worked abroad, predominantly in the earlier phase of labour migration to the Middle East, when rewards were often lucrative but migration experience limited. Their material success would have enabled them to achieve the influence and patronage needed to become elected community leaders.

Specific questions were asked about the impact of migration abroad on local farming and on social attitudes and behaviour, although it is difficult to dissociate the specific impact of working abroad from the universal and powerful influences of economic integration and social modernisation. Nevertheless, several distinctive impacts were consistently reported across all six survey areas.

An almost universal response was that land was farmed less intensively. In a few cases land was not worked at all, because of the perceived high cost of employing labour. More commonly, the land was worked sporadically by the remaining family, supplemented occasionally by paid labourers. This often meant that only enough rice was grown for subsistence purposes, invariably by broadcasting rather than transplanting, and second crops like maize and vegetables abandoned. Land was often rented out, sometimes to rice farmers for a percentage of the crop, and sometimes for monetary rent to sugar-cane growers seeking scale economies; this was particularly important in the Si Satchanali area where environmental conditions for cane growing were favourable. There was hardly any reported substitution of migrants by mechanisation; only three of the 63 respondents mentioned any such investment. This is related to the widely reported pessimism on the prospects for peasant farming, largely because of the unfavourable balance between low output prices for crops and high input costs for fertilisers, pesticides, seeds and labour. Going to work abroad is seen as a response to this pessimism, but also as accentuating it. While engaging in several part-time occupations is a traditional feature of the Thai countryside, respondents consistently reported an increase in such multi-occupational activity among returning foreign workers who had formerly been exclusively or largely farmers.

The reported labour shortages in our survey areas are only partly attributable to out-migration, both within Thailand and internationally. There is also the demographic impact on the young adult cohort of rapid fertility decline from the early 1970s and, more recently, of the AIDS epidemic, which has its major focus in the Northern region. As an equilibrating mechanism, one might have expected a significant entry of replacement agricultural labour from Thailand’s poorer neighbouring states. Indeed, in 1996, before the recession brought on by the 1997 financial crisis, the number of illegal immigrant workers in Thailand was officially estimated at some 700,000, mainly from Burma, so that in July 1996 an attempt to regularise their status was announced. Such workers were to be allowed to work in 39 of Thailand’s 79 provinces if registered by their employers; by the end of the amnesty in November 1996, 370,000 had been registered, 82% of them Burmese. Yet five of our six survey areas reported no foreign immigrants at all, except for the occasional itinerant Indian or Bangladeshi traders and two villages where a few hilltribe people from Thai-
land's borders looked after farmers' cattle for a pitance wage. This suggests that while foreign workers are extensively deployed in Thailand in major construction projects, fishing boats, rubber plantations and low-status service jobs like petrol-station attendants, they have not been used to bolster small-scale farming.

The only exception among our survey areas is the northern border area at Chiang Saen. However, the inflow here is not so much a labour replacement (out-migration rates, both internally and externally, are low) as a commercial opportunity to exploit cheap labour readily available at about half the normal Thai rate. The demand comes not from the family farms of Thai migrant workers as from commercial enterprises like chicken and pig farms or from service establishments in the Golden Triangle tourist and trading area. One village of 319 households at the heart of the latter area is reported as having over 200 Burmese workers, many accompanied by their families.

The social consequences of working abroad are more difficult to assess than the economic ones. The adverse impact on family relations (extra-marital affairs, divorce, disruptive behaviour by children, etc.) has been widely cited throughout Eastern Asia (e.g. in the Thailand context by Pongsapich, 1986). However, the vast majority of our respondents reported no direct relationship between working abroad and undesirable social trends, estimating (in nearly all villages) that in less than 10% of migrant-worker families was the relationship between husband and wife seriously compromised or undermined by working abroad; indeed, in some cases the opposite relationship prevailed, in which marital breakdown preceded departure to work abroad. These findings confirm those of Rigg (1989b) (p. 39) in three villages of Northeastern Thailand which supplied male workers to the Middle East. He cited the stabilising and supporting influence of relatives in the village, and noted that the occasional high-profile cases of adultery accompanied by suicide or murder exaggerated the actual prevalence. One positive social impact of working abroad widely reported by our respondents (47 of the 63) was the increased level of financial contributions to community obligations, notably the temple and festivals.

**Impact on individuals**

The impact of working abroad on individuals and their families can be assessed from our interviews with 22 recently returned migrants, although their experiences must be regarded as illustrative and not necessarily representative of migrant experience.

Some general features can be deduced from the summary information provided in Table 6. It is striking that several returnees were either not working at all or had resumed their farming activities. There was very little evidence that the income and experience gained abroad had resulted in occupational mobility, the only major exception (No. 10 in Table 6) being someone returning from four years’ factory work in Japan and using his considerable savings to establish an intensive cattle-rearing farm, a tyre business, and a shop for his wife to run; only one other returnee (No. 3) had also used savings in this way — to establish a capital-intensive chicken farm. With these exceptions, the remitted income was committed to general household expenditure, consumer durables, house construction and family savings.

While the great majority of migrants regarded their work abroad as having been 'successful', there were three exceptions. One migrant to Singapore (No. 12) felt he had been cheated, discovering only on arrival that the job arranged by the agent was an illegal one. He returned to Thailand within three days and managed to reclaim his fee. Fraud was also reported in case 22, where a fee was paid to an agent to secure travel to Malaysia and 30 days (initially) guaranteed construction work. He had always known the work was illegal, as was entry into Malaysia at night by small boat, but he was unprepared for the sporadic nature of the work, the primitive living conditions (in a container), rates of pay that were barely higher than those in Thailand, and constantly having to run away into the forest from police patrols of the work site. He talked of his return to Thailand after six weeks of 'misery' as 'an escape', requiring heavy expenditure on taxi fares because of his unfamiliarity with Malaysia. He has been unable to recover any of his fee and has now mortgaged his family's land to raise the substantial fee needed to access longer-term, regular, legal work in Taiwan. The third 'failure' (No. 20) was someone who cut short her contract as a housemaid in Hong Kong because of allegedly bad employers. Significantly, perhaps, she was the best educated of our sample, leaving school at 19, so that her tolerance level of poor working conditions may have been lower than most migrants.

Table 6 demonstrates that the major systematic differences in forms and types of migration abroad are encapsulated in the contrast between workers going to Taiwan (Nos. 1–5) and those going to Japan (Nos. 6–11), reflecting different mixes of public and private migration institutions to mediate...
Table 6. Details of 22 recently returned migrants from work abroad interviewed in field sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Area of origin</th>
<th>Age/sex</th>
<th>Pre-migration work</th>
<th>Fee*</th>
<th>Work abroad</th>
<th>Legal?</th>
<th>Income per month abroad*</th>
<th>Main work on return</th>
<th>Main use of remittancesb</th>
<th>Successful experience?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Taiwan</td>
<td>Si Satchanali</td>
<td>35 M</td>
<td>Ag'l labourer</td>
<td>75K</td>
<td>Foundryworker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>18K</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>Household expenditure</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Taiwan</td>
<td>Hangchat/Ko Kha</td>
<td>35 F</td>
<td>Maid</td>
<td>70K</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>15K</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Build house, buy land</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Taiwan</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>34 F</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>80K</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>13K</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Start chicken farm</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Taiwan</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>29 F</td>
<td>Officeworker</td>
<td>75K</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>28K</td>
<td>Just returned</td>
<td>Savings</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Taiwan</td>
<td>THoen</td>
<td>28 M</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>75K</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>20K</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>Motorcycle/savings</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Japan</td>
<td>Si Satchanali</td>
<td>27 F</td>
<td>Sexworker</td>
<td>Debt bond</td>
<td>Sexworker</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>100K</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>Build house</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Japan</td>
<td>Hangchat/Ko Kha</td>
<td>35 F</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Debt bond</td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
<td>160K</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>House/car/schooling</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Japan</td>
<td>Si Satchanali</td>
<td>29 F</td>
<td>Construction worker</td>
<td>Debt bond</td>
<td>Restaurant/sewer worker</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>80K</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Build house</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Japan</td>
<td>THoen</td>
<td>42 M</td>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>160K</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>65K</td>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>Build house and shop</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Japan</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>25 M</td>
<td>Small trader</td>
<td>185K</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>90K</td>
<td>Farming/business</td>
<td>Cattle farm/tyre business/shop</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Japan</td>
<td>THong Saliem</td>
<td>32 M</td>
<td>Ag'l labourer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Labourer</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>30K</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>House/car</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Singapore</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>34 M</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>40K</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Singapore</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>39 F</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>8K</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Farming/sub-agent/</td>
<td>Savings</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Singapore</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>38 M</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>40K</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>20K</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>Household expenditure</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Brunei</td>
<td>THong Saliem</td>
<td>50 F</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>8K</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Hong Kong</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>39 F</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>72K</td>
<td>Cook/construction</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>37K</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Savings</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Hong Kong</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>33 M</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>70K</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>65K</td>
<td>(Temp. return)</td>
<td>Savings</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Hong Kong</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>41 F</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Maid</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>45K</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Savings/tractor/tv</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Hong Kong</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>27 F</td>
<td>Serviceworker</td>
<td>25K</td>
<td>Maid</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>10K</td>
<td>Officeworker</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Hong Kong</td>
<td>Buriram</td>
<td>31 F</td>
<td>Factoryworker</td>
<td>25K</td>
<td>Restaurant worker</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>45K</td>
<td>(Temp. return)</td>
<td>Savings</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Malaysia</td>
<td>THong Saliem</td>
<td>28 M</td>
<td>Engineering worker</td>
<td>10K</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>4K</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


bExcluding repayment of debt.
the links between structures and agents. In Japan, the state has continued its exclusionist stance on unskilled migrant labour for fear of contaminating a self-perceived, culturally homogeneous society. Its exclusionist policy, operated by stringent bureaucratic controls on entry, residence and work authorisation, is inconsistent with the continuing demand for unskilled foreign labour in low-status jobs, even in the current recession, which has become a structural feature of its advanced economy. The main policy response has simply been to 'turn a blind eye' and tolerate something like 500,000 illegally working foreigners, most of whom have entered the country legally, mainly as tourists or pre-college students, but then overstay and/or take unauthorised jobs.

In Taiwan, on the other hand, there was formal government recognition in 1989 of the need to import skilled and unskilled labour in the construction and manufacturing sectors (Tsay, 1995). From this there developed a legal basis for labour importation through the issuing to employers of foreign worker permits, the licensing of recruitment agencies, and the conducting of negotiations at government level with labour-supplying countries. Accordingly, all five migrants to Taiwan shown in Table 6 had migrated and worked there legally on standard two-year contracts, had paid a similar agency fee, and earned broadly similar wages, enabling them to repay their fee within about six months. The one worker with significantly higher wages (No. 4) worked for a leading international sportswear firm, which may have been reacting to accusations in the West about its exploitative labour practices.

In contrast, all six migrants to Japan worked there illegally, and stayed in the country illegally after the expiry of their three-month tourist or business visas. They were prepared to risk arrest, deportation and unregulated working conditions for the highest wages available in Asia to unskilled workers. Two of the males had to raise agency fees which were three to four times their annual income in Thailand. One of them (No. 9) was a skilled mechanic with a good income in Thailand and savings from three work visits to the Middle East in the 1980s. The other (No. 10) had an uncle already working in Japan who provided a loan. His travel and work arrangements were made illegally by a woman from a nearby village married to a Japanese. Half the fee was paid initially and half after he successfully entered Japan. He remitted half of his monthly income via a Thai bank in Japan, and returned to his wife and children after four years with considerable savings of some US $50,000. Half of this sum he dutifully gave to his parents to repay their farming debts, and half he used to set up himself and his wife in three businesses in the village. He regarded his experience as atypical, reporting that 'others in the village couldn't afford to go to Japan'.

The experience of the third male migrant to Japan (No. 11) was very different. His only employment in Thailand had been on his in-laws' farm, but he was able to go to Japan without paying an agency fee by accepting much lower wages than the norm. His work was organised by a Bangkok company which illegally provided Thai labourers on short-term contracts of up to three months, the duration of the tourist visa. He had gone to Japan in this way five times in the last four years, his last contract involving loading motorcycles into containers for export. It is only the huge gulf in wages between Japan and countries like Thailand that make such short-term contracts profitable to employers, agents and workers alike.

Those who worked as sexworkers in Japan (Nos. 6–8) form a distinctive sub-group of migrants. These three women, from poor rice-farming families, were persuaded to go to Japan by recently returned 'successful' friends who introduced them to an agency in Bangkok. One of them was finalising a divorce and was therefore conducive to persuasion. Another had literally been sold into prostitution in Thailand as a teenager by her sister after the family land had been lost when two brothers had been cheated by migration agencies. Two of the women were well aware that their work in Japan was to be prostitution, the other being told it was work in a restaurant. There was obviously some form of screening, especially for physical appearance, at the agency, since several women attending at the same time for interview were rejected. No recruitment fee was charged (a decisive consideration for women from poor backgrounds), and the transfer costs (a remarkable $30,000) were to be repaid from the considerable earnings promised in Japan. In one case a false passport was obtained, since the agency felt it would be difficult to get a passport and tourist visa for a young, uneducated village girl. In this case, a genuine passport was obtained by the agency of someone of comparable age and looks but with a background (as a student nurse) respectable enough to justify foreign travel. In all cases the women entered Japan as tourists, and were accompanied on their flight by a member of the agency who guided them to particular officials (presumably bribed) at exit and entry points.

In Japan, the three women worked in bars with Thais and Filipinas, invariably under the control of a Thai 'mamasan' married to a Japanese man reputed to be in the Yakuza criminal fraternity. The debt bond had now been raised to about $40,000, the passports and return tickets retained or even confis-
cated, and the women constantly moved from bar to bar and town to town — strategies clearly designed to disorientate and isolate the women. Police often had a tolerant attitude (through bribery?) towards their illegal status, although eventually one of the women was deported.

All three women had managed to pay off their debt within a year, and returned home after about two years in Japan with savings of $15,000–20,000. They all regarded their experience as 'successful', not simply in material terms (two had built a new house and married Japanese men who provided them with a monthly allowance to live comfortably in their home village) but also in terms of their 'bravery' and their duty to their parents:

My friend told me I could earn lots of money in Japan if only I am brave enough. I told her that if you can do it, so can I. Japanese are not monsters, just human like you and me... I am very proud to have a new house and some money left. I just want a house, nothing more, and my parents to stay happily. I am very proud to be able to make my parents happy... In the past, the necklace I wore was very cheap, I used to look after buffaloes, and people looked down on me. But if I have money, everybody will respect me... Now I do rice farming — just for fun, but also I'm proud of it.

Conclusion

Although there are particular features of the newly emerged international migration system in Eastern Asia that distinguish it from comparable regional systems elsewhere in the world, the evidence from this case study in rural Thailand suggests that the impact of migration on the rural communities of origin is very similar to the older established and more extensively studied systems.

Our case study has revealed a widespread lack of confidence in small-scale farming. This is due partly to environmental vulnerability and the breakdown in traditional mutual-help arrangements, but is more importantly related to an adverse relationship between high input costs and low output prices, which often drives small farmers into escalating debts. These are the conditions that encourage labour migration but discourage the investment in farming of migrant remittances. This raises concerns about the vulnerability of some rural communities to external income dependency at a time when labour migration opportunities for Thai workers, certainly within Thailand but also internationally, have been hit hard by the regional financial crisis of the late 1990s.

The paucity of so-called ‘productive’ investment of migrant earnings in home communities stems from the pessimism over agricultural prospects, and the restricted alternative opportunities for investment in village activities; but it also reflects the basic strategy of many migrants in our communities, which is to provide immediate support to their families by removing debts and sustaining the types of household consumption that television and modern communications stimulate. For the great majority of migrants interviewed in our study areas, migration was seen overwhelmingly as a strategy of life support, sometimes as life-enhancing, but only rarely as life-changing.

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