

**Migrant Labour in Thailand:  
The Thai State and Governance of International Labour  
Migration since the 1990s**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

March 2006

To my parents and in memory of my grandmother, Khun-yaing Imjai SRIBURAPA; with love and devotion, they taught me the best of what I know

## Acknowledgments

Mistakes are almost inevitably one's own responsibility, but one's worthwhile achievements are rarely posted without the help of others (Hawke 2004, ix).

Much gratitude is owed to many individuals who have contributed in the production of this thesis through their support, advice or participation.

First and foremost, I extend my sincere appreciation to Professor Amarjit Kaur and Dr Barbara Rugendyke for their patience, support and careful supervision throughout the years of my candidature. They withheld no effort in guiding me throughout the preparation of my thesis. They constantly encouraged me to remain focused on achieving my goal. Their devotion of time and energy has been most exceptional. It has been both a privilege and a pleasure to have them as my academic supervisors and teachers.

I am grateful to Associate Professor Chris Cunningham who provided helpful comments, suggestions and editorial assistance. I am also indebted to Professor Ian Metcalfe, Professor Howard Brasted, Associate Professor Euan Fleming, General Somchai Vanichsenee, Dr Rene Villano, Lidia Nemitschenko, and Nick Hanson for their kind support. I thank Professor Jim Walmsley and Dr Afons van der Kraan for being of assistance during my supervisors' absence.

Above all, I would like to express tremendous gratitude to all participants in the interviews and questionnaire surveys, many of whom not only offered needed information, but also touched my heart with their enthusiastic participation. In this regard I would like to thank staff at the Department of Employment, the Alien Occupational Control Division, the National Statistical Office, the Board of Investment, the Bank of Thailand, the Thailand Information Center (Chulalongkorn University), Dixon Library (University of New England), Fisher Library (University of Sydney), and Institute for Population and Social Research Library (Mahidol University) for assisting me to find information with a smile.

I acknowledge the UNE Research Assistantship, the Asia Centre and the School of Economics for providing scholarships and financial support to pursue my study and field trips. I also would like to thank administrative staff of the university who have been kind enough to advise

and assist in their respective roles. I particularly thank Thea Harris, Stephanie Hamilton, and Fay Hardingham.

I owe a particular heartfelt thanks to a number of good friends who patiently and willingly offered all sorts of assistance during the course of this work. In particular I wish to thank Juckrawooth Attanawanich, Napakarn Nanthanasuk, Atchana Lamsom, Papassapa Rauyruen, Naruanard Sarapaivanich, Rosemond Boohene, and Piyapong Bunyasrisavasdi. My appreciation also goes to Aya Hayasaka, Alice Chen, Sarinthorn Sachavirawong, Tarika Limsavadiwong, Futaba Nagamoto, Scott Beach, Kevin Russell, Praveen Tantiyapong, Sirima Atikul, Maneesai Chandragholica, Noppakate Leelakajornjit, Piyavadee Anantaparakorn, Wanyada Tiewtranon, Puthaporn Vanichsenee, Leesa Moore, Farah Jane Orap-Silver, Linda Jonsson, Gishani Egan, Manohra Bernadine Hermann, Lucas Scott James, and in particular, David Cunningham, all of whom took an interest in my work and offered vast amounts of encouragement, love and friendship.

Finally, I thank my parents, sister, nephew and niece, without whom the realisation of this thesis would not have been possible. They sustained my spirit during the long and arduous years of work. I deeply appreciate their sacrifice, support, understanding and unconditional love. I look forward to repaying the debt after the completion of this thesis. I also pay gratitude to my late grandmother, Khun-yaing Imjai Sriburapa, who, herself, was a migrant in Thailand. Her personal experience taught me about life and inspired my work.

March 2006

Gorawut NUMNAK

## Abstract

This thesis examines international labour migration (ILM) in Thailand since the 1990s. Labour migration is a critical challenge for the Thai state and plays a key role in the economic, social and political development of the country. Migration has generated change in Thailand's labour market and pattern of settlement and an understanding of its causes and dynamics is crucial to guide appropriate economic and social planning. The study shows that the Thai state has implemented a range of measures over the years to address issues of migration, security and development. These concepts are interrelated. Irregular (illegal migration) represents a significant threat because it places pressure on Thailand's relationships with Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. At the same time, there is a need to incorporate migration issues into policy and promote better governance of migration as Thailand moves towards a knowledge-based economy.

Key policy challenges that are discussed in the thesis deal with different dimensions of migration. Issues covered include the characteristics, processes and causes of ILM; skilled labour migration; lower-skilled migration; and regional migration flows. The role of policy in addressing some of the major challenges posed by migration is examined in detail. This is of obvious importance given that migration issues affect co-operation with other states.

The thesis examines different groups of foreign workers, provides profiles of workers and makes distinctions between different categories of the foreign workforce. It also documents the migration experiences of two groups of foreign workers, unskilled construction workers and skilled (professional) workers.

The study utilises a multi-level approach to analysis and relies on a range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. At the macro level, the analysis incorporates multi-disciplinary studies to access perspectives and data from adjacent domains, especially economics, demography, law and political science. At the micro level, the analysis is based on information derived from interviews with one hundred migrant construction workers and questionnaire responses of one hundred skilled foreign workers.

My research reveals three key strands of ILM to Thailand since the 1990s. First, the foreign workforce has changed remarkably since the 1990s and the characteristics of different groups of foreign workers are considerably different. Second, Thailand's foreign labour recruitment policies are restrictive and have shaped, and continue to shape, migration processes. The entire process governing foreign employment in Thailand forms a Six-Pathway process, based on the type of work permit granted. Third, while rapid economic growth and structural change in Thailand have greatly increased the demand for migrant workers, other economic and non-economic factors have also facilitated and perpetuated ILM. At the individual level, causes for migrating of unskilled foreign workers are overwhelmingly economic and linked to the support of the family in the home country. Skilled workers appear to be motivated more by factors such as career opportunities, lifestyle and culture than by remuneration *per se*. In all, this research contributes to understandings about ILM to Thailand

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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(Gorawut NUMNAK)

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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACFOD	Asian Cultural Forum on Development
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMC	Asian Migrant Centre
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APMRN	Asia Pacific Migration Research Network
ARCM	Asian Research Center for Migration, Chulalongkorn University
B.E.	The Buddhist Era
BOI	Board of Investment
BOT	Bank of Thailand
CAPSTRANS	Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies
DOE	Department of Employment
EMPOWER	Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Recreation
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GERD	Gross Domestic Expenditure on Research and Development
GNP	Gross National Product
ILM	International Labour Migration
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILO-IPEC	International Labour Organization-International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPSR	Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University
ISAT	International Schools Association of Thailand
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISCO	International Classification of Occupations
ISIC	International Standard Industrial Classification of all Economic Activities
MIB	Melayu Islam Beraja
MLSW	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (currently – the Ministry of Labour)
MOI	Ministry of Interior
MOL	Ministry of Labour (previously – the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 1993-2002)
MRTA	Mass Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand
NEDB	National Economic Development Board
NEDP	National Economic Development Plan
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
NESDP	National Economic and Social Development Plan
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NIC	Newly-industrialising Country
NSC	National Security Council
NSO	National Statistical Office
OAU	Organization of African Unity

OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OHSEI	Asian Workers' Occupational Health, Safety and Environment Institute
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSSC	One Stop Service Center for Visas and Work Permits
PR	Permanent Resident
PTK	Professional, Technical and Kindred
R&D	Research and Development (or Research and Experimental Development)
SD	Standard Deviation
SMC	Scalabrini Migration Center
TAT	Tourism Authority of Thailand
TFP	Total Factor Productivity
TFU	Twenty Foot Equivalent Unit
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WP	Work Permit