

Migration Networks among “Chinese” Migrant Workers from Thailand to Malaysia

Survival Strategies of Descendants of KMT Soldiers in Southeast Asia

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1. Aim

This presentation aims to analyze how ethnic minority people, once marginalized in the nation-state system, try to find survival strategies in a trans-national space. Our research focus is labor migration networks among minority people whose fathers/grandfathers were former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) soldiers, who were born in the Thai-Myanmar border area, who now work at the Thai-Malaysia border, and who extend their labor migration networks further abroad.

2. Data & Methods

To analyze the above labor migration networks, we conducted interviews with migrant laborers now working in Betong town and Dannok town on the Thai-Malay border. These interviews have been carried out repeatedly from July 2010 until today. The number of informants so far is 12. They are four males and eight females between the ages of 25 and 38.

3. Results

Based on interviews about their life trajectories and labor migration histories, we found that all of the informants were born in Thailand and most of them hold Thai nationality, but they do not belong to either mainstream Thai ethnic groups or urban Chinese groups, whose members have been the main body of the new middle class since the late 1980s. They believe that they share a “cultural background” and “social norms,” particularly with Chinese people; their mother tongue is a Chinese dialect and they write and read Chinese letters. Even so, they are distinguished from both rich urban Chinese groups and mainland Chinese. They are classified as an ethnic minority group from the border area. This means that it is hard for them to achieve economic and social mobility within Thailand. Among male migrant workers, several cities are destinations for trans-border labor migration. These include Betong (on the Thailand side of the Thai-Malaysia border), Ipoh (Malaysia), Penang (Malaysia), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and Tainan (Taiwan).

4. Conclusion

From these findings, we can conclude that KMT descendants seem to search for the possibility of a life that transcends Thai society yet still lies within trans-border migration. In such cities, they simply identify themselves as “Chinese.”