Evidence or Attitudes? Assessing the Foundations of Thailand’s Labour Migration Policies

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Abstract: Despite evidence that migrant workers have made an essential contribution to Thailand’s economy for over two and a half decades, the recurring policy narrative has been one of protecting the sovereignty and security of the nation from a foreign threat. Even with expanding labour shortages caused by a rapidly ageing society, the policies implemented have continually made it difficult for migrant workers to remain in the country for extended periods of time or to receive equal treatment with nationals. Recently, the policy discourse has taken an even more reactionary turn, with the enactment of severe punishments for irregular migrants and their employers, further prohibitions on the types of work that migrants can engage in and plans to apply a levy on employment of migrants to force economic restructuring. As the gap between policy and evidence is clear from the standpoint of economic interest, an analysis of less rational considerations that have influenced the development of policies is necessary in order to trace their genealogy. This paper examines public attitudes towards migrant workers as a root cause of restrictive and illiberal governance of labour migration in Thailand, exhuming the role of media coverage, the educational curriculum, historical relations with neighbouring countries and national identity in their formation.

Keywords: migrant worker, labour migration, public attitudes, evidence, policy, Thailand.

1. Introduction

In June 2014, more than 250,000 Cambodian migrant workers fled Thailand over the course of three weeks due to fears of a large-scale crackdown on undocumented workers (Dickson and Koening, 2016). The Thai military had successfully launched a coup d’état on 22 May 2014 following months of street protests against Thailand’s elected government. One of its first official announcements was that any irregular migrant workers found in Thailand would be arrested and deported as Thai authorities “see illegal foreign workers as a threat because there are a lot of them and no clear measures to handle them, which could lead to social problems” (The Standard, 2014).

Cambodian migrant workers in particular had reasons to fear strong repercussions due to close relations between the deposed government and Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen (The Economist, 2014). Although the new military junta attributed the events which followed to unfounded rumors and mass hysteria among migrant workers (Phromyamayi, 2014; Kijchalong, 2014; Fuller, 2014), the history of rapidly shifting labour migration policies in Thailand provided solid reasons for migrants to accept the threat as credible.

The exodus had an immediate negative impact in several key industries, particularly in the booming construction sector in Bangkok. The sudden loss of the migrant workforce caused major disruption to employers and highlighted the uncomfortable fact that a significant portion of the Thai economy is structurally dependent on low-wage labour provided by migrant workers. With several sectors hit by a sudden and significant shortage of workers, the military junta had to open a new window for registration of irregular migrants. In total, nearly 1.6 million migrant workers were registered during a period of 5 months (Tunon and Harkins, 2017).

Although it was heralded by some observers as an important measure for protecting migrants from exploitation and abuse (Stevens and Labovitz, 2014), the registration denied migrant workers freedom of movement outside of the province in which they were employed and did not allow them to change employers unless highly restrictive conditions were met. Retrospectively, the registration policy was framed as a strategy for preventing trafficking in persons within the Thai Government’s campaign to improve its rating in the U.S Department of States Trafficking in Persons Report. Despite this attempt
at revisionism, it was originally implemented to help correct the grave economic damage wreaked by the military junta’s heavy-handed policy announcements towards migrant workers.

This event speaks to an inherent tension within Thailand’s labour migration policy over the last two and a half decades. Since registrations were first initiated in 1992 to provide migrant workers with temporary permission for stay and work, Thailand has struggled to reconcile its clear need for migrant workers to fill labour market shortages with a strong reluctance to allow migrants to remain in the country for any significant period of time. Short-term amnesties for irregular migrant workers are now a semi-annual ritual in the country, varying somewhat in detail but consistent in maintaining the precarious legal status of migrants. In essence, they allow employers to request a temporary reprieve from deportation. Even though bilateral MOUs were signed with countries of origin over 15 years ago to establish a formal channel for migration and allow a longer period of employment in Thailand, the process has been too complicated, slow and expensive to be effective (ILO, 2015).

A more recent policy designed to resolve the economic need for migrant workers with public resistance to their being a visible part of Thai society has been the development of Special Economic Zones in Thailand’s border areas. Large areas of the country have been designated for development coupled with incentives for businesses to encourage investment, covering 5,567 square kilometres across 10 provinces. One of the incentives is simplified and less expensive procedures for employment of migrant workers from neighbouring countries (Department of Foreign Trade, 2016). Unstated but a very evident part of the policy’s objectives is to keep migrant workers contained in the periphery, preventing them from moving further into Thailand while making use of the low-cost labour they provide.

The newly established ‘Migrant Housing Zones’ in 13 provinces appear to be similarly intended to segregate migrant workers from the general population in Thailand. The measure has been justified by the Thai Government as necessary to “ease health, congestion and pollution problems resulting from migrant workers renting rooms in other communities” (Charoensuthipan, 2017). Although the policy may help to improve living conditions for migrant workers, many currently live at or very near their place of employment in order to save money on travel expenses and earn more overtime pay. It is unclear if migrants will view the new housing arrangements as a desirable change.

Measures to further limit employment of migrants have been enacted as part of a comprehensive law on labour migration, entitled the Royal Ordinance Concerning the Management of Foreign Workers’ Employment, which came into force in June 2017. While a unified law could have brought greater coherency to Thailand’s largely ad hoc legal framework on labour migration, several of the stipulations of the new Royal Ordinance are distinctly reactionary. These include more stringent sanctions for irregular migrants and their employers, further prohibitions on the types of work that migrants can engage in and application of a levy on employment of migrants in order to force economic restructuring (DOE, 2017). One week after its promulgation, there were already reports of thousands of migrants fleeing Thailand and significant labour shortages emerging for employers (Bangkok Post, 2017).

From an economic standpoint, the evidence clearly demonstrates that migrants provide an essential workforce for the agricultural, manufacturing, construction, fishing, seafood processing, hospitality and tourism firms that help to drive the Thai economy. Workers who are becoming ever more necessary with the rapid ageing of the Thai population and increasing labour shortages in many key industries. In spite of these facts, migrants from neighbouring countries continue to be viewed as a “threat to Thailand’s social order, national security and even the health of its people” (Derks, 2013).

To better understand the disconnect between policy and evidence, a multi-disciplinary analysis was conducted, examining the foundational concerns of policy to trace their genealogy. The study focuses on the role of public attitudes towards migrant workers as a root cause of restrictive and illiberal governance of labour migration, in opposition to labour market and demographic data which strongly indicate the need for migrant workers in Thailand. In particular, it exhumes the role of media coverage, the educational curriculum, historical relations with neighbouring countries and national identity in the formation of negative views that are inconsistent with the empirical evidence.
2. Evidence of the substantial and expanding need for migrant workers in Thailand

To provide a basis for the argument that labour migration policies in Thailand do not appear to be closely responsive to evidence, this section briefly examines the current and projected labour shortages in Thailand in light of emerging demographic trends.

Demographic transition

Population data show that Thailand is undergoing a major demographic transformation towards an older society (figure 1). Longer life expectancies and a reduced birth-rate are positive impacts of Thailand’s rapid development in recent decades. Nevertheless, these changes are expected to lead to a decline in the number of Thai’s who are of working age (15-64) in the near term, which may potentially slow Thailand’s economic growth. According to ILO projections, Thailand’s labour force will actually start to shrink by around 2022 and continue to do so at an increasing rate until the end of the decade (ILO and ADB, 2014). Without labour migration, the dependency ratio of the elderly to working age population will rise even more dramatically in Thailand.

Figure 1. Thailand’s population by sex and age-group (2015 estimate and 2035 projection in millions)

Source: UNDESA (2012)

Existing labour shortage

Migrant workers are estimated to constitute approximately 5-8% of Thailand’s labour force of 38.6 million (Huguet, 2014). Obtaining a more precise picture of the actual number of migrant workers employed in Thailand is challenging given high levels of irregular migration and informal sector employment, as well as capacity constraints on collection of official data. However, even the low-end scenario provides strong indications of a substantial labour shortage in Thailand.

Thailand’s need for migrant workers to fill gaps in the labour market has been described as a ‘revealed shortage’ (Ducanes, 2013). No sound methodology has been established for conducting regular labour market needs assessments and admission quotas are set primarily based upon employer requests. Therefore, the entry of millions of migrant workers to fill jobs has to be used as a proxy to gauge the need for workers. Based on migrant stock data collected by the United Nations Department of Economic
Thailand has been the fastest growing destination country in ASEAN during the last 25 years, with 3.9 million migrants resident in the country as of 2015 (UNDESA, 2016).

The case for a substantial shortage of workers in Thailand is further supported by one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world, which was found to be 1.2% in the most recent labour force survey (NSO, 2017). Several structural factors contribute to this low rate of unemployment, including that Thais seeking work are easily absorbed into the agricultural sector and informal economy (Fernquest, 2015). But regardless of the causes, comparison to the massive number of migrants resident in Thailand suggests that there are not enough Thai workers to fill the demand for labour and that the gap continues to widen (figure 2).

**Figure 2. Migrant stock and unemployment of nationals in Thailand (1990-2015)**

![Migrant stock and unemployment of nationals in Thailand (1990-2015)](image)

Source: UNDESA (2016) and ILOSTAT (2016)

Research has found that migrants generally fill jobs that Thai workers are not willing or interested in doing, suggesting that migrant workers complement rather than replace Thai workers in most sectors (Martin, 2015). The commercial fishing sector in Thailand presents a particularly strong case study in this regard. Thailand’s fishing sector is a US$7 billion industry and is the economic backbone of many coastal areas of the country. However, Thai nationals began shunning work on fishing boats in the early 90’s due to the risks involved and higher pay available in other industries. This resulted in labour shortages which have for several decades been filled by tens of thousands of migrant workers, particularly from Myanmar and Cambodia (ILO, 2013). The work of these migrants on fishing boats increases the productivity of the Thai boat captain, Thai boat builder and other Thais employed in upstream and downstream sectors (Martin, 2007). A similar argument can be made in relation to migrant domestic workers, whose labour allows Thai nationals more time for work in paid employment.

**Projected demand for labour**

According to a labour market study by the Thai Government’s National Economic and Social Development Board, annual demand for high-skilled workers will continue to be around half a million for the next 5 years, while the demand for low and medium-skilled workers will rise steeply to 3.6 million (see figure 3). To fill this need, Thailand would have to admit another 350,000 migrant workers in the coming years, over and above the 3.25 million that are already thought to be employed in the

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1 It should be noted that the United Nations data defines a migrant as a ‘person living in a country or area other than that in which they were born’ and therefore includes additional foreign residents who are not permitted to work, such as refugees, retirees and students.
country (Huguet, 2014). The Thailand Development Research Institute has projected the need for additional workers as being even larger, estimating a shortfall of some 4.7 million workers by 2020 (TDRI, 2015). The shortage may be felt particularly acutely in the care economy due to increased demand for services among Thailand’s growing population who are over the age of 65, a substantial portion of which are currently provided by women migrant workers (ILO, 2016).

**Figure 3. Projected demand for migrant workers in Thailand 2012-21 (millions)**

![Chart showing projected demand for migrant workers in Thailand 2012-2021](chart.png)

Source: National Economic and Social Development Board (2014)

Thailand has recently developed an economic policy, dubbed ‘Thailand 4.0’, which would entail a dramatic restructuring of the economy away from labour-intensive production towards a model driven by trade in services, technological solutions and innovation. The stated aim is to reduce economic disparities and pull Thailand out of the middle-income trap through increased productivity (Public Relations Department, 2016). However, many observers have questioned whether Thailand’s labour force and educational system will be able to support such an ambitious transformation within the 4-5 year period slated for results to become apparent (Yoon, 2016; Rungfapaisarn, 2017; Rattana, 2017) It appears unlikely that the policy will dramatically diminish the need for migrants to fill low and medium-skilled jobs in the near-term.

### 3. Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Thailand

This section examines public attitudes towards migrant workers as a factor in shaping the policy response of the Thai Government. Utilizing the findings of 3 large-scale public opinion surveys conducted by ABAC University in 2006 (n= 4,148), the ILO in 2011 (n=1,014) and Mahidol University in 2014 (n=2,000), commonly held views about migrants are assessed in relation to the relevant policy and legal frameworks.

**Competition for jobs**

Over three out of five Thais (63%) interviewed for the Mahidol survey believed that irregular migrants compete with nationals for jobs and nearly half of respondents felt the same about regular migrants (47%). The survey reflects a widespread belief that the presence of migrant workers who are willing to work for lower wages takes away employment opportunities from Thais (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa, 2014).

Within the ABAC poll, 67% of respondents said migrant workers should not be free to apply for any job available in Thailand (2006). This perspective is faithfully matched by the policy framework, as Thailand currently sets quotas for admission by sector based upon employer requests under the MOU agreements it has signed with Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam. Strict rules for switching jobs have also been set within cabinet regulations, allowing changes to be made only if one of four
conditions are met. In addition, Thailand’s Ministry of Labour maintains a list of 39 occupations prohibited to foreigners based upon a royal decree (Ministry of Labour, 2016). There have been periodic crackdowns when foreigners are thought to be working irregularly in some of these professions.

**Contribution to the Thai economy**

Only two out of five Thai nationals (40%) responding to the ILO survey agreed that migrant workers make an important economic contribution to the country (2011). Similarly, most respondents to the ABAC poll did not believe that migrant workers are needed to sustain the growth of the Thai economy. Four out of five respondents went still further (80%), stating that the presence of migrant workers has the effect of lowering the skill level of Thais (2006).

Thailand’s recently discussed policy on developing a Malaysia-style levy system under the new Royal Ordinance on Management of Foreign Workers’ Employment appears closely linked to such views. By increasing the costs for employers, the policy measure would seek to encourage economic restructuring through reducing the number of migrant workers employed in Thailand. It is notable that the Malaysian Government has imposed an annual levy on employment of migrant workers since 1992, with few indications that it has had any real impact on decreasing dependency (Harkins, 2016).

**Equal labour rights**

Even for regular migrant workers, the majority of Thais interviewed for the ILO survey (64%) were of the view that migrants cannot expect the same pay or working conditions as nationals for the same job. Four out of five respondents (80%) felt that irregular migrants should not expect to have any rights at work (2011). It should be noted that this view is actually more restrictive than the rights provided to irregular migrants under the Labour Protection Act, which the Ministry of Labour has made clear applies to all, regardless of nationality or legal status (Tunon and Harkins, 2017).

The ABAC poll found that most Thais agreed with equal working hours and holidays for migrants (75%) but much fewer with equal wages (40%). Many respondents justified their responses by pointing out that the wages migrants received in Thailand, even if lower than those of Thai workers, were still better than what migrants earned in their home countries. Few Thais agreed with freedom of association for migrant workers, with 77% stating that migrants should not have the right to form unions (2006). The Labour Relations Act 1975 mirrors this conviction, allowing migrant workers to join existing trade unions but prohibiting migrants from serving as union leaders and committee members, effectively preventing the establishment of their own trade unions in Thailand (Marks and Olsen, 2015).

Similarly to the ABAC results, very few respondents to the Mahidol survey supported equal wages for migrants, regardless of whether their legal status was regular (19%) or irregular (6%). But broadly speaking, more Thais were supportive of equal labour protection for regular migrants (52%) than for irregular migrants (18%) (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa, 2014).

In general, the views professed within the three surveys on wages are more discriminatory than are allowed by Thailand’s labour laws. The provisions of the Labour Protection Act provide migrants with the right to receive the same statutory minimum as Thai workers, which also benefits nationals in preventing a race to the bottom on wages for low-skilled jobs. However, several common sectors for migrant employment in Thailand are governed by separate ministerial regulations which do not establish the same right to receive the minimum wage, including for domestic workers and agricultural workers (Harkins and Ahlberg, 2017).

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2 (1) the employer terminates the employment contract; (2) the employer closes down his or her business or the unit employing the migrant worker; (3) the employer commits an act of violence; or (4) the employer delays wage payments or violates the labor rights of the migrant worker. It has been stated that these conditions will be changed under the new Royal Ordinance enacted.
Threat to security, health and culture

Nearly nine out of ten respondents (89%) to the ILO survey felt that government policy towards admitting migrant workers should be more restrictive. One of the main reasons stated was that most respondents (80%) believed that migrants commit a high number of crimes in Thailand. In addition, nearly half of the respondents (48%) felt that migrants were threatening the culture and heritage of the country (2011).

The majority of respondents (59%) to the ABAC poll also agreed that the Thai Government should not admit more migrant workers due to the threat they pose to Thai society. Media coverage has played an important role in shaping public views on this issue, with four out of five people (80%) stating that they remembered reading news stories about migrant workers who had committed serious crimes in Thailand (2006).

As with other topics covered in the Mahidol survey, respondents held more negative views about the dangers posed by irregular migrants in comparison to regular migrants. More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) believed that irregular migrant workers are a threat to their lives and property, whereas less than half of Thais interviewed (47%) felt the same about regular migrants. A similar dynamic was found in regards to concerns about migrants spreading diseases, with more than nine out of ten respondents (92%) believing that irregular migrants carry diseases into Thailand, while only 36% shared the same view for regular migrants (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa, 2014).

The development of special economic zones in border areas and the establishment of migrant housing zones are policies that can be interpreted as closely linked to this perspective. They appear to be based on the belief that migrant workers pose a threat to Thai society and should live and work in segregated areas.

Access to social services

More than seven out of ten Thais surveyed by Mahidol University felt that regular migrant workers should be entitled to the same standard of healthcare provided to Thais (71%) but there was much less support for providing such services to irregular migrants (40%). Two-thirds of the respondents (67%) preferred to receive treatment at separate facilities than irregular migrants and half of those interviewed felt the same about regular migrants (50%). Regardless of the standards or location for provision of treatment, just 20% felt that health services for migrants should be publically financed for regular migrants and only 7% thought they should be for irregular migrants (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa, 2014).

Health policy in Thailand largely adheres to the perspective that healthcare services for migrants should be not be paid for with public funds. Although Thailand was able to implement a universal coverage scheme beginning in 2001, it has so far been targeted for coverage of citizens only. Even though the National Health Security Act that provides the legal framework for the scheme stipulates that “every person” is entitled to health services in Thailand, the law is generally interpreted to apply to those of Thai nationality (Schmitt, et al., 2013). Migrants are able to buy into the separate Migrant Health Insurance Scheme by pre-paying an annual fee but only about one-third of the targeted population were enrolled in 2016 and utilization remains low (Tangcharoensathien, Thwin and Patcharanarumol, 2017).

Integration and permanent settlement

The majority of respondents to the Mahidol survey stated that migrant workers should speak Thai rather than their native languages while employed in Thailand, both for regular migrants (84%) and irregular migrants (73%). Most also felt that migrant child should be taught the Thai language in schools, with 68% supporting this for the children of regular migrants and 55% for irregular migrants (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa, 2014).
The Mahidol study found that Thai nationals’ views on allowing migrants to remain permanently in the country were overwhelmingly negative. For migrants who had lived in Thailand for 10 years, only 18% of Thais supported granting permanent resident status. For migrant children who were born in Thailand, less than one-quarter supported providing them with permanent resident status for regular migrants (24%) and even fewer for irregular migrants (6%). Even for migrants who had married a Thai national, the majority felt that permanent residence should not be permitted in Thailand both for regular migrants (39%) and irregular migrants (15%) (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa, 2014).

Policies and legislation on granting permanent residence and citizenship closely reflect these largely opposed views. Thai Immigration Bureau rules for obtaining permanent residence are highly complex and few migrant workers are in a position to attempt the process on their own. Similarly, the Nationality Act is notoriously restrictive on conditions for granting citizenship and naturalization. There are currently 438,821 people registered as stateless in Thailand and estimates suggest the real total ranges from 2 to 3.5 million (UNHCR, 2016; International Observatory on Statelessness, n.d.).

4. Sources of Public Attitudes towards Migrant Workers

This section examines some of the key reasons why the Thai public’s attitudes towards migrant workers tend to be negative, taking into consideration the role of the news media, educational system, historical relations with neighbouring countries and national identity in shaping these views.

Media coverage

The headlines in figure 4 (translated from the Thai language) encapsulate some of the common depictions of migrant workers in Thai news outlets. The stories often focus on narrowly recurring narratives about migrants: the threat they pose to law and order, job security and personal safety; the diseases they carry; and the burden they bring to the public health and social welfare systems (Sunpuwan, 2014). This was dramatically illustrated by the high-profile murder case of two British tourists on Koh Tao in 2014. Long before the collection and analysis of evidence was complete, two young Myanmar migrants were identified as the prime suspects in the news media. Although they were later convicted of the murders, many observers continue to hold serious doubts about the validity of the evidence used in the case, including Thailand’s top forensic scientist (Mckenzie, 2016).

Figure 4. Headlines from news stories covering migrant workers in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘19 barbaric workers seized in Chumphon’</td>
<td>(Daily News, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Police chief reconfirms Myanmar migrant workers are real suspects’</td>
<td>(Thai PBS, 2014)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Alien workers in open scuffle killing one in Phuket’</td>
<td>(Thai Rath, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Over 4,000 aliens caught poaching Thai’s jobs – mostly from Myanmar’</td>
<td>(Daily News, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Search for illegal alien workers expedited’</td>
<td>(Manager Online, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Murderer killed and stuffed a four-year-old in a black garbage bag, could be Myanmar’</td>
<td>(World Chinese, 2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The language applied in describing migrants within news stories is rarely neutral and serves to reinforce perceptions of their negative impact on Thai society. In many cases, migrant workers are referred to by the media using words that suggest their presence or actions are illegal or threatening. Both in Thai and English language reports, terms such as “illegal”, “alien”, “thief”, “barbaric”, and “gang” are commonly used. A quantitative analysis of 15 years of articles published in The Nation newspaper found that the word “illegal” was the far the most frequently used modifier for the term “foreign worker” (ILO, 2016). The repeated use of such words can contribute to normalizing the view that migrants represent a dangerous “other” within society, creating social divisions and an “us and them” mentality (Anderson, 2013).

The Thai Government has itself contributed to such depictions of migrant workers at certain times, including during a controversial public awareness campaign that equated migrant workers with poisonous snakes (Thanasombat, 2004). In another case, a concert in Phuket that had been scheduled to entertain migrant workers and “bring the community together” was cancelled in dramatic fashion. The Governor of Phuket made his apprehensions about a gathering of migrants known publically through the media:

“...I do not agree with the idea, especially for security concerns. Can you imagine tens of thousands of migrant workers coming together in the same place, at the same time?” (Kueprasertkij, 2015).

One-sided media coverage of migrants is not unique to Thailand, with similar patterns found in the British press in recent years (Migration Observatory, 2013). However, the quality of reporting on migration tends to be particularly low in Thai-language media outlets as only a small fraction of Thai journalists are adequately familiar with migration issues (Sunpuwan et al., 2014). Lack of in-depth investigation often results in biased reporting, particularly privileging government sources. While the English-language press generally provides a more critical perspective on the situation of migrant workers in Thailand, it is largely irrelevant for many Thais as they do not typically consume English language news.

Low media literacy among the Thai public creates a significant knock-on effect to imbalanced news coverage of migrants. Substantial efforts have been made over the last decade to address the issue of media literacy in Thailand but challenges within the educational system and a persistent digital divide between urban and rural areas has limited progress (Nupairoj, 2013; UNESCO, 2011). Despite heavy-use of social media and greater access to information in some parts of the country, many students lack the analytical skills necessary to separate fact from opinion (UTCC, 2016; Bunnag, 2012).

Making a determination about whether unfavourable media coverage of migrants should be considered primarily a cause or effect of negative public attitudes is challenging. It can be argued that the press typically produce the types of news reports that are most likely to be popular among their target audience. Regardless, media narratives clearly have influenced the Thai public’s views about migrants through reinforcing negative stereotypes and beliefs.

**Educational curriculum**

Research has found that higher educational attainment is one of the most consistent predictors of increased tolerance and support for migrants (Fussell, 2014). However, the heavy-handed portrayal of foreign enemies within the Thai public education curriculum may make it somewhat exceptional in this regard. It has been suggested that these depictions continue to hold influence long after students have completed their educations.

*The assertion that history and geography textbooks have exercised a negative influence on attitudes towards other countries is longstanding. It is derived from conceptions of nationhood, national character and national identity, which have in turn spilled over as forms of nationalism, and have spread into social and political*
Attitudes, and hence into the education system (Marsden, W. E., cited in Traitongyoo, 2008).

The history of Siam as reflected in its textbooks is fundamentally rooted in the country’s venerable Royal Chronicles. Despite transformative changes after the Siamese Revolution of 1932 that reshaped the social, political and economic order of Thailand, much of the Thai educational curriculum remains heavily influenced by old power structures. From primary school to university, historical accounts have retained a highly militaristic and elitist perspective, which seem intent upon instilling an unquestioning patriotism in learners (figure 5). Thai students are taught a heavily partisan version of the country’s history of conflict and the roles of Siamese heroes and heroines with them – even including memorization of a series of recitations venerating their deeds (Nidhi, 2011).

**Figure 5.** Thai history textbooks during the past five decades (the lower row are required reading under the Ministry of Education’s Basic Education Core Curriculum).

It has been pointed out that the model of education used in Thailand also contributes to greater acceptance of the highly nationalistic curriculum among students. The material is delivered through Thailand’s longstanding tradition of rote-style and teacher-centred education, a pedagogical model which does not support the development of critical thinking skills among students (Ekachai, 2017).

Lack of an educational system better suited for the current geopolitical climate is not for lack of trying.
Since the 1970s, the Thai educational model has undergone five major reform efforts. However, the push for reform has consistently left much of the anachronistic take on history untouched. Since 2001, Thai history has been made a standalone subject with the goal of “strengthening Thai identity and developing good citizens through the process of learning history” (Prachatai, 2012).

In the words of the well-known Thai historian Chanan Yodhong: “The history of Thailand is taught with a sense of prejudice towards neighbouring countries. It fails to incorporate positive social relationships, local ways of life, cultural diversity and the changing context of the societies” (Kerdmongkol, 2007). Such a view of foreign nations and peoples is often counter-productive in an increasingly globalised world, particularly considering the ambitious regional integration process that has recently been initiated among ASEAN member states.

**Historical relations**

The historical relationship between Thailand and Myanmar has long been steeped in suspicion and hostility due to conflicts that stretch back centuries, a sentiment crowned for Thais by the sacking and burning of the former Thai capital in Ayutthaya in 1767. The impact of this history of struggle between the two nations has resulted in frequent representations of the Burmese as the ‘archenemy’ in historical and literary works.

Because the fall of Ayutthaya was viewed as such an unmitigated disaster, it provoked the need for narratives to make sense of the downfall (Nidhi, 2002). These stories have been immortalised through a variety of mediums, including in traditional songs such as Prachum Phleng:

*The sinful Burmese ravaged our villages and cities. A great number of our citizens were killed and many temples were...ruined. Our peaceful kingdom was abandoned and turned into forest. The Burmese showed no mercy to the Thai and felt no shame for all the sins they had committed.*

The advent of a Thai nationalist spirit was partly facilitated by the archetypal vilification of the Burmese as the aggressive and relentless adversary (Chutintharanon, 2000). It also contributed to reciprocal distrust within the Myanmar populace caused by their own perceptions of prejudicial elements within Thai nationalism.

It is fair to say that these narratives still resonate strongly in the Thai popular consciousness and continue to have real world impacts in shaping foreign policy towards Myanmar. The six decades of official diplomatic relations between the two countries since they were established in 1948 can be characterized as ranging from reasonable levels of bilateral engagement in cooperative efforts to more traditional antagonistic roles in conflict (Lang, 2002).

Prominent Thai historian Nidhi Eoseewong has noted that “Burmese” is often used by Thais to refer to all Myanmar nationals regardless of ethnicity. He has pointed out that not all of the historical clashes that occurred between the populations of Thailand and Myanmar should in fact be viewed as national conflicts, including the famous battles between King Bayinnaung and Ayutthaya. Ironically, most migrant workers from Myanmar that Thais would meet are likely to come from ethnic minority groups that had nothing to do with these historic conflicts.

In a meeting held among educators and historians in Bangkok hosted by UNESCO, former ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan reflected on the way in which the history of conflict continues to influence international relations within the region:

*There are still fundamental miscommunications, deeply held prejudices and emotionally charged perceptions which we have to overcome. Some of these go back to relatively recent events, some of these date back generations...or, rather, to the way these past events have been taught and perpetuated* (UNESCO, 2013).
Such hyperbolic interpretations of history are not limited to public education in Thailand. They are also manifested in popular culture, including Thai films, soap operas and popular music. Numerous movies have been made about the famous battles between Thailand and its neighbouring countries, such as Bang Rajan (2000), The Legend of Suriyothai (2001), Siyama (2008) and The Legend of King Naresuan series. The Thai Government has been heavily involved in the making and distribution of some of these films, directly funding several of the episodes of the King Naresuan epic and arranging a free nationwide screening of King Naresuan 5 (Prachathai, 2014). The central storyline of these movies typically underscores the heroism and ascendancy of the Thai nation in comparison to its foreign enemies (Harnwong, 2015).

Television soap operas about the historical conflicts with Myanmar, many adapted from the films mentioned above and involving a similar level of jingoism, have also been a mainstay of Thai popular culture. The recent series, ‘A Lady's Flames’ (Plerng Phra Nang), was so crude in its depiction of fictional Myanmar royals that Soe Win (a descendant of Myanmar's last king) called for the show to be cancelled because it was “insulting”. He viewed the soap opera as hypocritical given Thailand’s extremely strict lese-majeste laws regulating depictions and reporting on its own monarchy (BBC, 2017).

Although considered more broadly nationalist rather than specifically focused on the historical conflicts with Myanmar, the songs of the rock band Carabao are notable due to their extreme popularity in Thailand. After its breakout nationalist anthem criticizing globalization, “Made in Thailand”, Carabao went on to write several songs dealing with patriots in Thai history. This includes the songs “Jao Tak” (King Taksin); “Kon Thai Rue Plao” (Are You Thai?); “Bangrajan Wan Pen” (Bangrajan, Day of the Full Moon); and “Naksu Pu Yingyai” (The Great Fighter). A dramatic change from its origins in Thailand’s leftist movements, the song lyrics were closely aligned with establishment interests and made Carabao one of the most commercially successful musical acts in Thai history (Eamsa-Ard, 2006).

Although the historical relationship between Thailand and Myanmar has been particularly adversarial and is the most salient given that the majority of migrants in Thailand come from Myanmar, a similar history of conflict with Lao PDR and Cambodia also exists. In the latter part of the 18th century, the Lao Kingdoms of Champassak and Vientiane were overrun by the Siamese and the Kingdom of Luang Prabang was forced to accept vassalage. A century of forced relocation and slavery by the Thai elite followed, particularly to what would become the Isan region in the Northeast of Thailand. The violent suppression of an uprising by the Lao King Anuvong during this period has continued to haunt Thai-Lao relations to the present day, as has the reality that more ethnic Lao now live in Thailand than within the entire country of Laos due to forced resettlement (Stuart-Fox, 1997).

The history of Thai-Cambodian relations also includes a series of wars and annexations, an antagonistic past that has readily boiled to the surface in recent decades with even slight provocation. In 2003, an alleged statement by a Thai soap opera actress that Cambodia’s Angkor Wat temple rightfully belongs to Thailand led to the burning of the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, violent protests in Bangkok, severing of diplomatic ties and deployment of military forces (Aglionby, 2003).

**National identity**

The political modernisation of Siam advanced dramatically in the late 19th century. A number of reforms were instituted in an effort to “civilise” the nation under the pending threat of imperialism from the British and the French. This included significant changes to social services, public infrastructure, the educational system and the abolition of slavery (Traitongyoo, 2008). To create a unified nation-state, provincial administration was centralized (Thesaphiban). A cultural reformation was also undertaken as part of the nation-building efforts, universalizing the central Thai language and creating a shared national identity.

With newly delineated borders incorporating several peripheral vassal states, it was necessary to make a determination of who actually belonged as citizens in the newly established Kingdom of Thailand.
During this integration process, a number of ethnic minority groups with distinct languages and cultures were nonetheless identified as being Thai, including the Yuan, Malay, Karen, Lua, Kui, Khmer, Mon and Lao (Vaddhananphuti, 2005).

Ensuring use of the Thai language was a key strategy used to assimilate these ethnic minority groups, as well as newly arrived Chinese immigrants. The Chinese were forced to renounce their cultural identity, including the use of their own language. Chinese schools were declared ‘alien’ and Chinese newspapers and books were prohibited. The Primary Education Act made the Thai language the compulsory medium of education for Chinese immigrants. In essence, the (re)production of national ‘identity’ among minorities and immigrants sought to eliminate linguistic and cultural diversity in order to construct an imagined homogenous Thai ethnic group (Traitongyoo, 2008).

Despite updates to maintain its relevance, the concept of “Thainess” (Khampenthai) remains largely a well-preserved relic of the Thai nation-building period. Its politics include the demarcation of what is considered acceptably Thai while defining other groups or behaviours as foreign and a source of potential threat. For example, the current prime minister has become well-known for questioning whether members of the political opposition, and even provocative dances performed by pop stars, are in fact Thai (AFP, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Public attitudes often play an important role in shaping policy on labour migration because politicians and decision-makers can easily be drawn into introducing restrictions that they believe are in-line with public sentiment. In other cases, these actors may actively contribute to the development of hostile views towards migrants in order to advance their careers and political agendas.

The results of this study suggest that public attitudes are a meaningful factor in the formulation of labour migration policies in Thailand. While concrete linkages cannot be drawn for specific policies without additional interviews with the decision-makers involved, there are strong indications that the policy framework has been influenced by prejudicial beliefs about migrants. In many respects, the trajectory of policy development appears to be more closely linked to these irrational views rather than to the data showing that migrant workers are badly needed in the Thai labour market.

It is important to acknowledge that Thailand is far from alone in holding largely negative opinions about migrants, nor in developing policies that are more responsive to these sentiments than to the empirical evidence available. Recent polls and elections in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia have highlighted that leveraging latent xenophobia towards migrants is an extremely potent political tool. From building walls to stopping boats, the global trend appears to be towards increased demagoguery and scapegoating of migrants.

To counter the negative attitudes and misconceptions that exist within the public sphere, evidence of the beneficial impacts of migration for both countries of origin and destination must be widely and creatively disseminated. Campaigns to support a more positive image of migrants among the Thai public need to address the root causes of negative perceptions if they are to be effective. These attitudes towards migrants have been methodically shaped by Thailand’s media coverage, educational system, historical relations and national identity for generations. They can only be substantively changed through a long-term commitment to building greater understanding of the positive contributions that migrant workers make to Thai society.
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