

Female Transnational Migration from Thailand Like Thirty Years Before?

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For 30 years Thai women have set off for international labour migration. Germany and Japan are among the most important receiving countries. Based on the findings of the study on *The Rights of Thai Women to Migrate to Work Abroad* (Pataya 2009), this paper discusses the development in Thai female transnational migration to Germany and Japan during these three decades. To point out the continuous nature of this migration, it will start with a description of the number of Thai migrants in these two destination countries.

Thai migrants in Germany and Japan

The figures of the Thai population residing in Germany listed by the Federal Statistical Office (StatBA) reveal that migration from Thailand to Germany has taken place since 1960. Until 1975 there were nearly 2000 Thais in Germany, in which the number of men and women were nearly equal (1,004 men and 988 women (Pataya 2003:256). Since 1975 the numbers of Thai women immigrating to and living in the Federal Republic have permanently increased. In 2007 there were 53,952 Thais in Germany

(excluding naturalized persons), 14% of which are men (7,514 persons) and 86% women (46,438 persons) (StatBA 2008). About 60% of these women are married to German husbands.

Simultaneously the number of marriages between Thai women and German men has increased steadily since 1990. Since 1991 more than 1000 bi-national marriages occurred annually. This can indicate that the female Thai migration to Germany has a specific character, viz. of marriage migration.

The legal migration from Thailand to Japan began about the end of

the 1970s. Along with this kind of labour migration, the illegal recruitment of Thai labour, especially that of women for prostitution, has begun in 1981 (Wichit/ Pawana 1997:26). From 1980 to 1997 the number of entries into and exits from Japan by male Thais were higher than those of females but from 1998 the numbers are lower. The fluctuation of male Thai migrants is higher but the women have a longer duration of stay though they arrive less frequently (Pataya 2004: 37). The Japanese immigration law requires migrants staying in Japan for over 90 days to register with

the local government. This includes immigrants without legal status though only few do. The majority of registered migrants are those holding legal status. Since 1990 there was a rapid increase in the numbers of Thai women registered in Japan. In 2007 there were 41,384 Thais registered in Japan. 11,230 were men while 30,154 were women.

In the recent decade the number of intermarriages between Thai women and Japanese men has also increased. This points

Fig. 1a: Thai Population in Germany

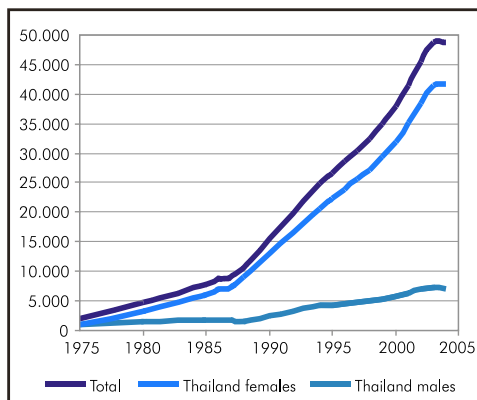
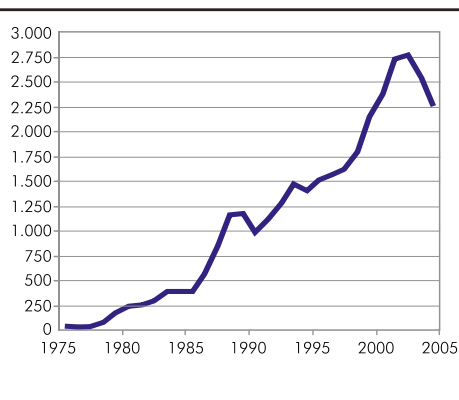


Fig. 1b: Annual No. of Marriages: Thai Wife, German Husband



Source: StatBA 2008, Pataya 2003 and StatBA 2006

to a trend that labour migration of Thai women to Japan assumes a character like that to Germany, which is marriage migration. Obviously, labour migration of Thai women to Japan initiates female Thai marriage migration to Japan.

What has changed?

The figures above show that female transnational labour migration from Thailand to Germany and Japan has started at about the end of the 1970s and continued through today. Some aspects of this development are the following:

1. The expatriate women

As in the beginning of the transnational migration to Germany and Japan the majority of Thai migrant women still come from the North-Eastern and Northern regions of Thailand. In the past 15 years, however, women from the Central and Southern regions, especially the tourist areas, joined the emigration. The women have mainly completed the compulsory education (elementary school). For the last 10-15 years many migrant women have had a higher education, e.g. vocational or university level. With regard to the occupation of the women prior to the emigration, a number of migrant women in the recent years have worked in various jobs, from employees in offices and department stores, and self-employed to teachers. This is unlike the beginning period, in which the women were found to originate from two main areas, agriculture or prostitution. Looking at their biography the migrant women still belong to three groups:

(a) Single mothers who are the sole breadwinner and responsible for their children's livelihood. (b) Commercial sex workers for foreign men. For this group of women the migration to Germany means building a family and beginning a new life. (c) Young unmarried women affected by relative economic deprivation searching for economic and social advancement: They consider migration as the only means of access to the things they desire. Among these three groups, the single mothers represent the majority if we include the number of the former sex workers who prior to entering into prostitution were divorced or separated and had

to bear the responsibility for their children alone. Additionally, these women have prior experience in internal labour migration.

2. Factors associated with migration

One important factor pushing Thai women to emigrate to Germany and Japan is economic deprivation. This reflects the uneven distribution of economic opportunities in Thai society putting poorly educated people like most of Thai women migrating to Germany and Japan at a disadvantage in building an economic existence or in satisfying their consumption demands. This resulted from the failure of the National Economic and Social Development Plan (started in 1958). On the other hand the better economic conditions in the destination countries and the hope for higher incomes are factors affecting the decision for emigration. Transnational migration is deemed to be an alternative for better fulfilment of their aspirations.

Regarding the social and cultural aspect family problems (divorce or separation) and the double standard of social expectations and control over women with respect to their responsibility in the family, especially for the children, in Thai society are among the important factors inspiring Thai women to migrate. On the demand side, the lack of unskilled labour and difficulties in interpersonal relationships and in searching for a partner on the part of many men in the destination countries offer the possibility for the immigration of Thai women.

The most decisive factor making the migration possible is the existence of social and kinship networks providing information and support necessary for emigration. These networks on the other hand lead to the emergence and existence of a "culture of migration" in the communities of origin which result from the accumulation of migration experiences across years (Massey et al. 1994). It creates conditions for more migration which brings about that migration flows become self-sustaining.

At the individual level, the transnational labour migration to Germany and Japan is the last phase of a long stepwise migratory process with its beginning mainly in villages in remote areas. It is a continuation of internal migration in Thailand including prostitution migration. The migration is facilitated by opportunities and support provided by friends or relatives, brokers usually working with transnational organized criminal syndicates, marriage agencies, or German and Japanese men.

3. Patterns and paths of migration

Migration through different venues leads to different patterns of migration and to different legal status of women after immigration: (a) Undertaking migration organized by transnational criminal syndicates or brokers, or even sometimes by relatives or friends for work in prostitution or in other occupations (particularly in Japan), women usually enter the countries of destination unlawfully and become illegal migrant workers. (b) Migration through initiation and sponsoring by relatives or friends who themselves are also migrants and have already settled down in Germany and Japan, serves the purpose of marriage to German or Japanese men. In this case the women enter the country as fiancées or wives and obtain a residence permit as a spouse. (c) Immigrating through marriage bureaus or private agents similar to marriage bureaus, the women can obtain a legal status as a spouse. (d) Entering

Fig. 2a: Registered Thai Migrant in Japan

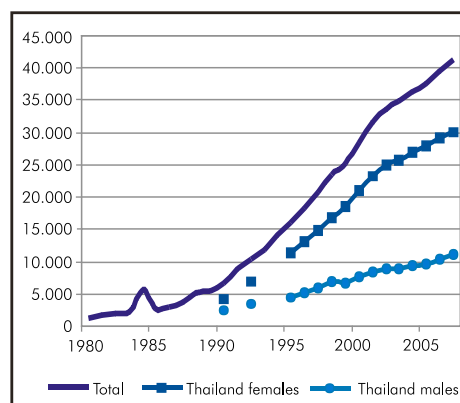
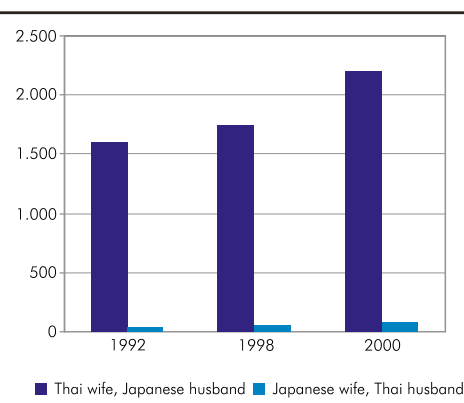


Fig. 2b: Thai-Japanese Inter marriages



Source: Japan Immigration Association 1980-2007 and Suzuki 2003:176

the country in the company of German and Japanese tourists, the husbands-to-be, and getting married to these men the women are entitled to stay and work legally.

Considering the dynamic aspect of migration, it can be found that the legal status and life situation of Thai migrant women may change over time and over circumstances. Through marriages to German or Japanese men their status may change from illegal migrant worker to spouse with a legal residence permit, and legal migrant worker, if they continue working.

Thai women utilize marriage as a means to obtain a residence permit which enables them to work legally and as a legal pathway of the immigration to Germany and Japan, which I define as marriage migration: a migration emerging by means of marriage (Pataya 2002, 2003). The decisive mechanism shaping the immigration of Thai women into this specific form of marriage migration is the immigration laws in Germany and Japan which stipulate exactly the types of immigrants entitled to stay and work. Given the barriers of immigration policy of countries of destination, marriage has turned out a means of legal immigration coupled with the expectation of social and economic achievement.

Similarly women with an initial legal status as a spouse who afterwards took up employment have turned into transnational migrant workers. Yet, the existence of this group is not recognized by the governments both of Thailand and of the destination countries.

4. Outcomes of the migration

During three decades Thai female transnational labour migration has led to the following: (a) The development of status from foreign spouse to transnational migrant worker. (b) The transnational migration of children who follow the migration of their mothers with a log of several years. (c) Stateless children born to illegal Thai Migrants in Japan. And (d) the repatriation to Thailand of migrant women in retired age.

Concluding remarks

The figures of Thai migrant women in Germany and Japan reveal the feminization of transnational labour migration from Thailand to industrialized countries. The discussion above indicates that on the individual level, during three decades of female transnational labour migration there has been only little change, namely in terms of education, occupation prior to migration, and area of origin. However, nothing has changed on the structural level. The uneven distribution of economical opportunities that resulted from the failure of the National Economic and Social Development Plans I to V remains unresolved even at the end of Plan IX (2002-2006). In particular, for single mothers whom the society expects to take responsibility for their children, there is insufficient support from the state. Simultaneously Germany and Japan uphold strict immigration policies stipulating only limited venues for entry into the countries. Thus, the flows of female transnational labour migration from Thailand to industrialized countries are likely to continue in the present form.

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