



Kevin Hewison

**A Preliminary Analysis of Thai Workers in
Hong Kong: Survey Results**

Working Papers Series

**No. 44
April 2003**



**香港城市大學
City University
of Hong Kong**

The Southeast Asia Research Centre (SEARC) of the City University of Hong Kong publishes SEARC Working Papers Series electronically.

©Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

SEARC Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

Note: The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not represent the views of the Southeast Asia Research Centre, its Management Committee, or the City University of Hong Kong.

Southeast Asia Research Centre Management Committee

Professor Kevin Hewison, Director
Professor Joseph Y.S. Cheng
Dr Vivienne Wee, Programme Coordinator
Dr Graeme Lang
Dr Zang Xiaowei

Editor of the SEARC Working Paper Series

Professor Kevin Hewison

Southeast Asia Research Centre

The City University of Hong Kong
83 Tat Chee Avenue
Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong SAR
Tel: (852) 2194 2352
Fax: (852) 2194 2353
<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc>
email: searc@cityu.edu.hk

A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THAI WORKERS IN HONG KONG: SURVEY RESULTS¹

Kevin Hewison
Southeast Asia Research Centre
Department of Applied Social Studies
City University of Hong Kong
sskevin@cityu.edu.hk

INTRODUCTION

It is surprisingly difficult to obtain accurate statistics on migration by region or globally; this is especially the case for migrant labour. Even the International Labour Organisation (ILO) can only present rough estimates. The ILO estimates that there are roughly twenty million 'migrant workers, immigrants and members of their families' in Africa, 18 million in North America, 12 million in Central and South America, seven million in South and East Asia, nine million in the Middle East, with some thirty million across all of Europe. Western Europe alone accounts for approximately nine million migrants considered economically active, together with their 13 million dependents (ILO, 2002). Further, the ILO estimates that the rate of growth of the world's migrant population more than doubled between the 1960s and the 1990s, with much of this growth having originated from developing countries and regions. But for anyone studying migration, these figures are indeed very rough; for example, if the category 'South and East Asia' is considered, seven million appears remarkably conservative.

In this context, migration is clearly an important and increasing trend. Migration for work has become a central – albeit a contested – element of the current

¹ The research included in this paper was funded by a Small-Scale Research Grant (9030872) provided by City University. In addition, the Australian Research Council provided a Linkage International Project Grant for the project *Migration, Ethnicity and Workforce Segmentation in the Asia Pacific*. The grant facilitated the collaboration of researchers at SEARC, City University of Hong Kong and CAPSTRANS, University of Wollongong.

My thanks to Iris Lui Sze Kei, a Thai-speaking third year student in East and Southeast Asian Studies at City University, who conducted most of the interviews reported here. Thanks also to Jill Chung of the Southeast Asia Research Centre, who compiled the data from the interview forms, and to Amy Sim and Eric Zhang, who assisted with some of the initial library research. Finally, I thank Vivienne Wee and Amy Sim for making drafts of their surveys and reports on Indonesian and Filipino migrant labour available to me. Of course, I am responsible for this paper, its interpretations, and any errors.

This paper was originally prepared for the joint International Workshop on Migrant Labour and Ethnicity in Asia, CAPSTRANS, University of Wollongong and Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, 11-12 February 2003.

phase of globalisation. In the earlier period of globalisation that concluded with World War I, along with trade, there was an increase in international migration for work that was part and parcel of the restructuring of global wealth and production. The current round of globalisation, beginning from about the early 1980s, the same trend is noticeable, although the expansion of trade and investment has been far greater than the expansion of migration for work. As Cairncross (2002: 3) asserts, taking the liberal position, 'Powerful economic forces are at work. It is impossible to separate the globalisation of trade and capital from the global movement of people.'

According to OECD figures (cited in Cairncross, 2002: 4), the countries with the highest proportions of their respective workforces supplied by foreign born populations remain the now developed, colonial settler countries of the Australia (24.6 percent), Canada (19.2 percent) and the US (11.7 percent). It is also clear that labour migration in the Asian region, has been both historically significant, and continued to expand in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.² As major economies in the region have experienced growth in the period since the 1970s, labour migration began to expand. While there was a slight hiccup in this pattern, associated with the Asian economic crisis in 1997, labour migration has continued apace. Of course, the region is diverse, and so the patterns of labour migration are also complex. I do not intend to examine these here, but some of the notable features are:

- Migrant workers from Asia are remarkably mobile, both within the region and globally (Medel-Anonuevo, 1996)³
- Migration is generally from relatively poorer regions and countries to relatively wealthier regions and countries (Ronnås and Ramamurthy, 2001: 3, Sovannarith, 2001)
- Migration within the region has grown most rapidly since the mid-1980s, and some have suggested that this growth was associated with the economic crisis of the mid-1980s (ILO, 2002)
- The flow of migrants is often 'serial', in the sense that, for example, Thai workers may migrate to Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong in search of higher paid opportunities, while Cambodians and Burmese migrate in to Thailand to take the same kinds of jobs Thais do overseas, such as domestic worker or labourer (Ronnås and Ramamurthy, 2001: 3)
- Remittances from overseas Asian workers are often critical to household economies, and are economically significant in national contexts in a

² For a flavour of the significance of migration in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Skinner (1957, 1958), Purcell (1951) and Warren (1993).

³ One striking example: *The Economist* (23 January 1999) reported that high labour demand in Iceland had led to the import of labour from Thailand and the Philippines! Further, as I discovered in 2001, even travelling in remote parts of Italy on a Sunday will meet Filipina domestic workers who have the day off from their work.

number of countries, most notably the Philippines (Asis, 2001, Malhotra, 1998, Supang et.al. eds., 2001, Supang, 2001)

- There has been a significant feminisation of migrant labour since the 1980s (Medel-Anonuevo, 1996)

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China (hereafter, Hong Kong or HKSAR) has not been immune from these trends. The city has seen a remarkable increase in migrant labour since the late 1960s. There are now a number of well-known studies of migrant labour in Hong Kong, and there is no need to detail these here. In understanding contemporary migrant labour in Hong Kong, it is important not to forget that Hong Kong is itself a migrant society. In fact, the 2001 Census reported that just more than 40 percent of the Hong Kong population was foreign born (Hong Kong Government, 2002). Of course, much of the population originated elsewhere in China. Non-Chinese migrant labour is a more recent phenomenon, associated with the increased wealth generated through the industrialisation in the 1960s to 1980s, and subsequent development as a financial and service centre. The HKSAR government reports that, in 2001, some 5.1 percent of the population was not of Chinese ethnicity (Table 1). As can be seen, 3.1 percent of the non-Chinese population (more than half of the total non-Chinese population) is identifiably from the Southeast Asian region.

Table 1: Population by Ethnicity, 2001

Ethnicity	Number	%
Chinese	6 364 439	94.9
Filipino	142 556	2.1
Indonesian	50 494	0.8
British	18 909	0.3
Indian	18 543	0.3
Thai	14 342	0.2
Japanese	14 180	0.2
Nepalese	12 564	0.2
Pakistani	11 017	0.2
Others	61 345	0.9
Total	6 708 389	100.0

Source: Hong Kong SAR, 2001 Census, from the web site:
http://www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/eng/hkstat/fas/01c/cd0052001_index.html
 (downloaded 9 February 2003).

It is recognised that Southeast Asian migration to Hong Kong is now dominated by domestic workers.⁴ Their official migration began in 1969, when the colonial administration gave permission for expatriates to bring their domestic workers with them when coming to Hong Kong. The total number of domestic workers in

⁴ In this paper I will generally use the term 'domestic worker'. Other works use the sanitised 'domestic helper' to refer to these workers. Older works use the terms 'maid' or 'servant'.

Hong Kong increased from just 881 in 1974 to 70,335 in 1990 (Office of the Commissioner for Administrative Complaints, 1995: 4). The increases through the 1990s are shown in Figure 1, together with data up to December 2002. It is noticeable that the total number of domestic workers more than doubled between 1990 and 1994, and by a further 71 percent between 1995 and late 2002 (the peak figure was 241,020 in October 2002). While there are number of non-domestic workers from Southeast Asia in Hong Kong, it is domestic workers who are the bulk of Filipinos and Indonesians in the SAR, while the Thais are a more diverse group (see Table 2).⁵

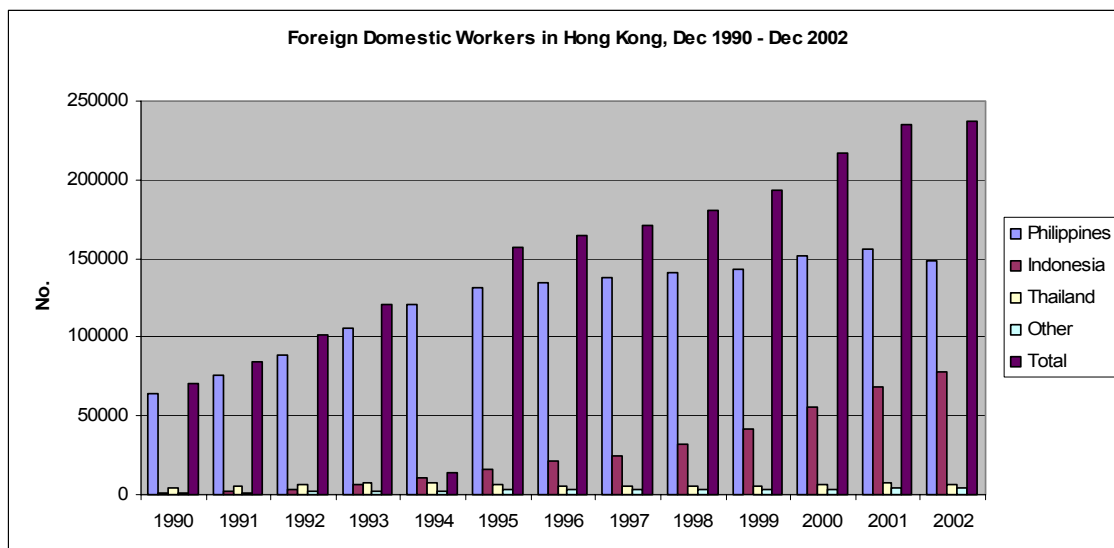
Table 2: Employed Persons by Occupation and Ethnicity (%)

Occupation	Filipinos	Indonesians	Thais
Managers and Professionals	4.4	2.2	26.5
Clerks	0.2	0.0	3.1
Service and sales	1.0	1.0	12.4
Other workers	94.4	96.8	58.0

Source: Adapted from ACNielsen (2000: 11)

As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, this paper deals with a relatively small group of expatriate workers in Hong Kong. Before turning to an examination of this group, however, it is useful to provide some background regarding migrant labour from Thailand.

Figure 1:



Source: Data supplied by Thai Labour Department, originally from the HKSAR Immigration Department (provided by fax, 21 January 2003)

⁵ It seems that there are more Thais married to Hong Kong residents than either Filipinos or Indonesians, and that there are a substantial number of Thais who are resident managers and administrative workers for Thai companies in Hong Kong (see ACNielsen, 2000).

THAILAND AND MIGRANT LABOUR

Historically, Thailand has been a relatively open society, and received large numbers of immigrants, mainly Chinese, but also including small but important groups such as South Asians. The migration of the Chinese was most significant, with Skinner (1957) estimating that, between about 1880 and 1930, there was a net addition of some one million Chinese to the population of Thailand. Most of these Chinese arrived as labourers. Even within Thai society migration has often been a pattern associated with traditional life, where people sought specialised skills or better lands and resources (see Seri and Hewison, 2001). As urbanisation and industrialisation expanded, many Thais have moved from rural to urban areas (see Suwanlee, 1984). In other words, the peoples of Thailand are not unfamiliar with migration in general, migration for a better life, and migration in search of work and cash. Overseas migration, while not common, was also not unknown. Sino-Thais regularly moved between Thailand, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Penang, and Singapore for business and work. It is also known that Thai women were trafficked for prostitution in the nineteenth century, to Singapore in particular (see Warren, 1993).

In recent years, Thais have shown increased interest in seeking work outside the country. Supang and Germershausen (2000: 1) argue that the 1950s and 1960s saw small numbers of Thais going abroad, mainly to study. Some of these stayed overseas and were later joined by relatives. The 1960s also saw Thai women marrying US servicemen and moving overseas. These early movements resulted in, for example, a relatively large Thai community in Los Angeles. However, it was in the mid-1980s that saw the beginning of larger scale overseas migration for work. Most of these migrants were men, taking up contract work in the Middle East (see Table 3). This changed in the 1990s, as work became more readily available in the region, closer to Thailand, and in locations seen as safer than the Middle East. This change has also seen more women migrating as domestic workers and sex workers.

It can be noted that the data presented in Table 3 is officially-recorded migration for work. Non-governmental sources regularly estimate the number of Thais working overseas as in excess of 500,000 in the late 1990s (see Ronnås and Ramamurthy, 2001: 3). At the same time, it may be noted that, in 1999, it was estimated that there were more than 700,000 migrant workers, both legal and illegal, labouring within Thailand (Srawoath, 2002: 14).

Recently, as in the Philippines, the Thai government and some business interests have encouraged workers to seek positions outside the country. After the onset of the economic crisis, this became a government policy (Supang, 2001: 1, *Bangkok Post*, 12 August 2001).⁶ The government places very few

⁶ It has recently been announced that, the Department of Employment would again shift its policy, to focus on domestic employment opportunities, admitting that the government had 'lost its way' and had 'paid too much attention to securing jobs overseas' (*Bangkok Post*, 10 April 2003).

restrictions in the way of Thais who wish to work overseas (Sriwooth, 2002: 14). Remittances to Thailand from Thais overseas are significant (see Table 4). The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare⁷ provides licences to agencies that facilitate overseas contract work. Recently, however, this process has been embroiled in conflict and a multi-billion baht corruption scandal, where potential overseas workers were cheated of funds by agencies supported by senior officials in the Ministry (see, for example, *Bangkok Post*, 30 April 2002).

Table 3: Numbers of Thai Workers Overseas, 1980-99 (selected years)

Destination	1980	1982	1993	1995	1997	1998
	No.	No.	No.	No.	No.	No.
Middle East (including Israel)	20,690	105,186	12,422	19,987	17,421	16,237
Asia	n.a.	3,303	118,600	191,188	173,311	164,392
<i>Taiwan</i>			<i>n.a.</i>	<i>120,360</i>	<i>100,916</i>	<i>n.a.</i>
<i>Singapore</i>	<i>191</i>	<i>1,901</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>15,624</i>	<i>17,770</i>	<i>n.a.</i>
<i>Brunei</i>		<i>960</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>17,292</i>	<i>17,671</i>	<i>n.a.</i>
Total workers overseas	20,881	108,127	137,950	202,296	182,216	188,105

Source: compiled from data presented in Supang and Germershausen (2000: 9) and at the Thai Farmers Bank web site (<http://www.tfrc.co.th/tfrc/cgi/ticket/ticket.exe/1494669571/tfrc/eng/economic/realsect/elabor2.htm>).

Table 4: Thai Overseas Worker Remittances via the Banking System, 1996-2001

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Total (billion baht)	45.78	51.91	58.84	56.91	67.94	55.15
% of GDP	0.99	1.10	1.27	1.23	1.39	1.08

Source: *Bangkok Post*, 12 August 2001, Bank of Thailand, *Raidai thi khonngan thai nai tang prathet songklap doi phan thanakan, 2540-2545*, Bangkok: Bank of Thailand (supplied by Thai Labour Department, Hong Kong), Bangkok Bank, Key Economic Indicators (downloaded 9 February 2003 from: http://www.bbl.co.th/download/04_gdp.xls).

With this background, it is now appropriate to turn to the results of a survey conducted in Hong Kong in late 2002.

THAI WORKERS IN HONG KONG

While there have been numerous studies of overseas migrant workers and domestic workers in Hong Kong, there have been few studies of Thai workers. Extensive literature searches have located only one major study devoted to an analysis of Thai workers in Hong Kong. This study, by Ng and Lee (2000) was a survey of twenty Thai workers, all domestic helpers, with most of the surveying being handled through the Thai Consulate-General in Hong Kong. Data about Thais has been included in a number of other studies of migrant labour in Hong Kong, some of them noted above, with the most significant being that completed by ACNielsen (2000) and another by the Asian Migrant Centre and

⁷ Recently renamed the Ministry of Labour.

related organisations (AMC, 2001). The latter included interviews with 150 Thai domestic workers.

The Survey

The survey reported in this paper was designed to seek a range of information from Thai migrant workers. The questionnaire was written in English, although the questions were asked in Thai by a Thai- and Cantonese-speaking field assistant. It contained more than 50 items, with these having been selected following several days of general discussions conducted by the investigator with Thai workers, singly and in groups. Information collected during these meetings is also included in this paper.

Following the development of the survey form, some pre-testing was conducted by the investigator and field assistant, and the form revised. The revised survey was used to conduct interviews in a number of locations around Hong Kong (Kowloon City, North Point, and a Thai-style Buddhist temple at Yuen Long). The surveying was carried out in an opportunistic manner, with the field assistant seeking to interview Thais during their leisure time. Almost all were conducted on Sundays – the most common day off for Thai workers.⁸ Each interview required 35-50 minutes. The results were tabulated, and are presented below. No attempt has been made to conduct any statistical tests of significance. Rather, the data are discussed in the context of other available studies.

The work

As indicated in Table 5, all respondents were employed at the time of their interview. As expected, given the predominance of domestic workers among Thais in Hong Kong, 78 percent of the respondents reported that they were domestic workers. The remainder laboured in similar working class occupations, in restaurants, shops, and cleaning. It was found that the workers were spread throughout Hong Kong, both in terms of employment and place of living, with no pattern discerned.⁹

It was found that almost all domestic workers earned the minimum wage laid down by the Hong Kong government (HK\$3,670).¹⁰ Only four earned more than this, but still less than HK\$5,000. None were paid less than the official minimum. This was an expected result as other studies have indicated that more than 91 percent of Thai domestic workers receive the minimum wage (AMC et. al. 2001: 27). The other workers interviewed were relatively better

⁸ A problem created in this is that workers who do not get a day off cannot be contacted for interview.

⁹ A pattern of living at the place of employ – especially for domestic workers – will be discussed below.

¹⁰ In April 2003, the minimum wage for domestic workers was effectively reduced by HK\$400 a month.

paid, with two (working in restaurants) earning between HK\$9,000-10,000 per month.

Table 5: Current occupation

Occupation	No.	%
Not employed	0	0
Domestic helper	39	78
Supermarket or retail shop	5	10
Restaurant	4	8
Cleaning worker	2	4

Ninety-four percent of respondents were employed by Chinese. Two worked with Thais, and just one with Europeans. All respondents reported that they received regular days off from their employer. Almost all had leave on Sundays and public holidays, while those who were not domestic workers usually received alternative days off.

Demographic, educational and marital characteristics

The first point to note is that only women were interviewed in this study. It is difficult to locate Thai men who are workers in Hong Kong. Many of the men live and work at construction sites, and interviewing is not usually encouraged by employers. Ng and Lee (2000) and AMC (2001) also reported such difficulties. The ACNielsen report (2000: 7) noted that only 1.6 percent of its sample of Thais were men. All of the interviewees in our study held Thai nationality, and all but one (who claimed to be a Christian), reported that they were Buddhist.

The average age of the respondents was 39.5 years. This is substantially higher than the average age for Thai domestic workers in the AMC (2001: 22) survey (34 years), and much higher than that for all domestic workers (31 years). As seen in Table 6, most of the interviewed workers were aged between 30 and 49. Possible reasons for Thais being older than those reported in other studies have two explanations. First, in earlier times, in order to prevent sex workers entering, Hong Kong Immigration gave all Thai women migrants aged between 18 and 40 special attention on arrival. This caused agents to focus on older women when bringing them to work in Hong Kong. Second, as will be noted below, Thai migrant workers tend to have considerable work experience in Thailand prior to migration.

In line with this higher age when interviewed, it was logical to discover that Thai workers were somewhat older than other Southeast Asian migrant groups when first arriving in Hong Kong. Almost two-thirds of respondents were aged 30 and older when they first came to Hong Kong. Only two of the 50 respondents were aged less than 20 years when first arriving in the HKSAR.

Table 6: Age of Thai Workers

Age range (years)	No.	Cumulative %
Less than 20	0	0
20-39	5	10
30-39	22	54
40-49	18	90
Over 50	5	100

The AMC (2001) and ACNielsen (2000) studies each noted that Thai migrants tended to have had lower levels of education than either Filipino or Indonesian domestic workers. More than three-quarters of our respondents had either no education or had completed only primary school (Table 7).

Table 7: Education Levels

Level	No.	Cumulative %
None	2	4
Primary	34	72
High School	12	96
Technical or Vocational School	2	100

In terms of marital status, it was reported that 78 percent of respondents had been married or were currently married at the time of the survey (Table 8). This is different from the average for domestic workers, where the AMC (2001: 20) found that 50.9 percent of these workers were single. This suggests that Thai workers were likely to view their time in Hong Kong as providing an opportunity to support their families.

Table 8: Marital Status

Marital Status	No.	Cumulative %
Single	11	22
Married	26	54
Divorced	9	92
Widowed	4	100

Table 9 indicates that almost three-quarters of those interviewees who were currently married had been wed for more than ten years. Interestingly, of those with partners, 42 percent of these were living in Hong Kong. The remainder of these spouses were in Thailand.

Almost three-quarters of respondents had children. More than half of them had two or three children. In line with the relatively high age of the respondents, they reported that 58.8 percent of children were aged 15 years and over, and 94 percent were at or above school age (Table 10).

Table 9: Number of years married

Years married	No.	Cumulative %
1-5	5	19.2
6-10	2	26.9
11-15	6	50.0
More than 15 years	12	96.2
Not stated	1	100.0

Table 10: Number of Children

No. of Children	No.	Cumulative %
None	14	28
1	10	48
2	20	88
3	6	100
More than 3	0	100

The education and care of children was often mentioned by respondents as a major reason for seeking to earn money in Hong Kong. The respondents reported that most of their children were being cared for in Thailand (of 68 children, 54 were in Thailand). Parents, relatives and husbands were usually the carers of the children while the respondent was in Hong Kong (37 of the 54 children in Thailand).

Before migration

Particular attention was given to the origin of the respondents. Table 11 shows this data, by province and region.

It is clear that most of the migrants originate from the poorer regions of Thailand. The most common regions of origin were the Northeast (56 percent of respondents) and North (14 percent). These regions are the poorest in Thailand. The Northeast and North regions are also the major source of Thailand's working class. Somewhat unexpectedly, 22 percent originated in the Centre region, including Bangkok. However, when studies for the 1970s and 1980s of migration to Bangkok are examined, it is reported that about half of the migrants come from the Central region, a quarter from the Northeast, and 14 percent from the North (Suwanlee, 1984: 230). It is usually assumed that this pattern changed during the 1980s, with the Northeast becoming a major source of migrants both in Bangkok and overseas.¹¹ These patterns of regional and provincial origin are also noted for Thai workers in Singapore (Wong, 2000: 60) and Taiwan (Samarn, 2000: 161).

¹¹ The Thailand National Statistical Office reports that the major sources of out-migration in 1997 and 1998 were Bangkok, the Northeast and the North (Table 1.9, In and Out Migration from Household Registration Records, <http://www.nso.go.th/eng/stat/subject/subject.htm#cata1>, downloaded 9 February 2003).

Table 11: Home Location in Thailand

Region/Province	No.	%
Centre	11	22
<i>Angthong</i>	1	
<i>Ayudhya</i>	1	
<i>Ratburi</i>	1	
<i>Saraburi</i>	1	
<i>Suphanburi</i>	1	
<i>Bangkok</i>	6	
East	4	8
<i>Chonburi</i>	1	
<i>Rayong</i>	3	
Northeast	28	56
<i>Chaiyaphum</i>	2	
<i>Kalasin</i>	1	
<i>Buriram</i>	3	
<i>Nongbualamphu</i>	1	
<i>Nakorn Ratchasima</i>	11	
<i>Nongkhai</i>	2	
<i>Surin</i>	1	
<i>Udornthani</i>	5	
<i>Yasothon</i>	1	
<i>Roi-et</i>	1	
North	7	14
<i>Lampang</i>	3	
<i>Lamphun</i>	1	
<i>Phitsanulok</i>	2	
<i>Tak</i>	1	

The large proportion of respondents (22 percent) originating in Nakorn Ratchasima is of interest. It is not immediately clear why this province should provide such a high proportion of migrants. A number of factors may suggest some reasons for this outcome. The province now hosts the second largest city in Thailand, and is on good rail (since the late 19th Century) and road (since the early 1960s) links to Bangkok. However, most provinces now have convenient road communications to the capital, although the bus trip to Bangkok from Nakorn Ratchasima takes only about three hours. The province has long had Thai military bases and also hosted a US military base in the 1960s. The province has also been a centre of commercialised agriculture since the railway went in, and the land frontier has been limited since the 1980s.

The provincial origin of the respondents was confirmed in language data, where 46 percent reported that their at-home language was not Central Thai (e.g. Lao or Khmer). It was found that only 18 percent could speak any English, while all but one reported that they could speak some Cantonese. This ability to learn Cantonese was also reported in the ACNielsen (2000) study, and confirms data that many Thai learn some Cantonese prior to departure for Hong Kong (discussed below).

It was found that only about 56 percent of respondents were living in their home province prior to their departure for Hong Kong. The remainder were living and working in Bangkok. This matched employment responses, where 48 percent claimed to have been employed in Bangkok prior to migrating to Hong Kong.

This work and migration experience appears to have been significant in prompting the respondents to seek overseas opportunities.

The list of work undertaken by the respondents prior to their move to Hong Kong is long. It seems, however, that 36 percent were engaged in occupations that would be considered working class, a further 16 percent were farmers, while 26 percent were engaged in work related to basic services or housekeeping (see Table 12). Most of these jobs would be considered unskilled or semi-skilled in Thailand. It is clear that migration is an effort to gain higher remuneration for working class occupations rather than an attempt to move out of these occupations. In addition, there is sometimes a view in Hong Kong that domestic workers have often taken lower status jobs in order to gain higher wages. This does not appear to be the general case for Thai migrant workers.

The length of time respondents had been in these jobs prior to departing for Hong Kong also varied considerably, ranging from one year to more than ten years. It is likely that having migrated to work in the urban sector may encourage a mindset that makes overseas migration a viable option for Thai workers.

Table 12: Last job before coming to HK first

Job/Work	No.	%
Accountant, office worker or clerk	4	10
Nurse	1	
Retail sales	6	12
Domestic or office helper and child-minding	7	26
Home Duties	5	
Cook	1	
Factory worker	6	36
Seamstress	7	
Messenger	1	
Hair Stylist	3	
Bus ticket seller	1	
Farmer	8	16

While almost one-third of respondents reported that they were unwaged in Thailand, 50 percent claimed wages of 2,501 to 7,500 baht per month prior to migration (Table 13). In 2001-2, the Bangkok minimum wage was about 4,000 baht per month. It is noted that the average wage for domestic workers in Hong Kong was the equivalent of about 19,000 baht per month, with additional basic living expenses provided – 80 percent of respondents were accommodated by or with their employers. This makes Hong Kong an attractive destination.

Prior to migrating to Hong Kong, three-quarters of respondents undertook some training for their expected work. This was especially so for domestic workers, who undertook short course training in Cantonese language and Chinese-style cooking.

Table 13: Approximate monthly wage in previous in-Thailand employment

Wage/month	No.	Cumulative %
Unwaged	16	32
0-2,500 baht	5	42
2,501-5,000	17	76
5,001-7,500	8	92
7,501-10,000	2	96
More than 10,000 baht	2	100

It is noteworthy that 92 percent of respondents had no experience of overseas work prior to moving to Hong Kong. Of those few who had worked overseas previously, the locations were Italy, Malaysia, Taiwan and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, 48 percent of respondents stated that family members had had such experience, with almost a third having experience in Hong Kong. A further third had work experience in Brunei, Singapore and Taiwan. The remainder had worked in Saudi Arabia, Germany, the US and Cuba. Such family experience of overseas migrant work, especially if positive, is likely to make other family members more willing to migrate.

Getting to Hong Kong

When deciding to come to Hong Kong, it was found that the initial information about work and living came from friends and relatives (80 percent). The remaining workers seemed to have access to public information, usually radio or other media advertising. Following this, the respondents would usually contact an employment agent (78 percent) who would facilitate the negotiation of a contract with a prospective employer or with a Hong Kong-based agency.

All of those who used an agent were required to pay a fee for this service. Of the remainder, four percent had direct contacts with employers, six percent were assisted by friends or relatives already in Hong Kong, while ten percent made contacts themselves. These were not required to pay fees. The fees paid to agents were reportedly substantial, most usually in the range of 20,000 to 50,000 baht, but with some paying much more than this (see Table 14). A payment of 40,000 baht amounts to about 7-8 months of a two-year domestic workers' contract.

Forty-two percent of those who paid fees to agents took the money from their own savings. The remainder took out loans. Those who took loans usually went into debt with relatives and friends. Loans from relatives were most often interest-free. Agents and loan companies were the next most common source of the funds required. Only one respondent reported having taken a loan from a commercial bank. Of those who paid interest, most paid less than five percent per annum. Only one interviewee reported paying greater than 10 percent a year.

Table 14: Payments to Agents

Amount paid (baht)	No.
Less than 10,000	1
10,001-20,000	4
20,001-30,000	10
30,001-40,000	13
40,001-50,000	9
50,001-60,000	1
60,001-70,000	1
More than 70,000	1

The experience of work in Hong Kong

The vast majority of respondents (80 percent) were experiencing their first migration for work to Hong Kong. Eighteen percent were making their second excursion, while one respondent was making a third trip. Despite this, the length of working experience in Hong Kong was long. Sixty percent had been in Hong Kong for six or more years, while only ten percent had been in the territory for less than a year. Fully 92 percent had a contract prior to their first arrival in Hong Kong. When asked why it was they had decided to work in Hong Kong, half explained that it was because of the good salaries that were available. Another 28 percent stated a related reason – that they needed money to support their families and children or needed money to pay debts. Twelve percent came on the advice of relatives, friends or employers, while 16 percent explained that they wanted a change of working environment.

On arrival in Hong Kong each of the respondents was met at the airport. In two-thirds of cases, the person who met them was an agent. A further 22 percent were met by a relative or friend, while the remaining 14 percent found their employer there to meet them.

When asked why it was that their current employer had hired them, more than 70 percent claimed that their employer was looking for a particular skill (for example, in childcare, care of the elderly, cooking or house-keeping). Fully 90 percent of respondents explained that they were satisfied with their *work* in Hong Kong. The reasons for this were clear – 80 percent claimed that it was the high wage



Sunday: Thais gather at Kowloon City

that satisfied them. Other reasons included: Hong Kong as a well-regulated, ordered and convenient society, and good employers and conditions. Those who were not satisfied generally attributed this to homesickness. In a related question, 86 percent of the respondents stated that they were satisfied with *living* in Hong Kong, while another six percent were not dissatisfied. Half of these respondents indicated that the reason for their satisfaction was the good salary they received. Of those who were dissatisfied, the main reason was

homesickness. The dominance of the wage in the thinking and motivation of Thai migrant workers is evident.

Asked to identify the worst feature of their work, the respondents were clear that it was their heavy workload and long hours. While none of the respondents mentioned any abuse during interviews, during other discussions with Thai domestic workers, a few did mention that they knew of sexual and physical abuse. These interviewees mentioned such abuses themselves, or knew of friends who had suffered such abuse. The AMC (2001: 35, 37) found that one-quarter of Thai domestic workers had experienced some form of verbal or physical abuse, while six percent reported sexual abuse.

Most respondents took the view that verbal and physical abuse was 'part of the job', and was not uncommon in their work in Thailand.¹² Some interviewees responded that physical abuse could be dealt with by 'training' the employer; that is, the worker needed to develop strategies that prevented such abuse by an employer. Sexual abuse was not common, but when encountered by domestic workers, tended to involve touching and sexual innuendo by elderly members of the employing family. The respondents regarded such attention as 'vulgar', and a problem that resulted from close living with the employing family in small apartments; almost a quarter of domestic workers did not have their own bedroom, but shared, usually with children.

It is important to note that 94 percent of our respondents felt that they had the respect of their employers. However, more than two-thirds also explained that they did not feel that they were respected by Hong Kong people generally. While few were willing to state reasons for this, when discussed, it was usually felt that their jobs were considered to be of low status. As found in the AMC study (2001: 42), most discrimination was encountered in shops or public transport. In these places Thais consider that if the behaviour of Hong Kong people was not discriminatory, then it was often 'rude' or 'ill-mannered'.¹³ Even so, the vast majority of respondents (96 percent) claimed that they had no real problems in Hong Kong, and became used to the 'rudeness' of Hong Kong people.



Shopping for Thai food at Kowloon City

In line with the general satisfaction with living and working conditions, the majority of respondents were planning to continue working in Hong Kong. Two-thirds hoped to stay as long as they had work, while another 20 percent planned

¹² The *Bangkok Post*, 21 May 2001 reported that the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare was drafting a new domestic law that would provide protection to housemaids from physical and mental abuse by employers. This followed an allegation that the wife of a former prime minister had repeatedly beaten her 14 and 15 year-old maids.

¹³ Thais are very conscious of being well-mannered, gentle, even-tempered and quiet in public behaviour.

to seek a further two-year contract or even longer. None, however, planned to settle in Hong Kong.

As was noted above, Thai workers received regular days off from their employers. Days off are important for the workers. Thai workers tend to be isolated from the local community, apart from the family they work with (see Ng and Lee, 2000). As most are domestic workers, their experience of Hong Kong is narrow, and loneliness is sometimes a problem. Hence, especially on Sundays, Thais tend to congregate together.

With multiple responses possible, most interviewees claimed that they used their holiday to meet with friends and relatives or to shop (96 percent). This is evident in the places where Thai workers meet on a Sunday, most especially in Kowloon City. One respondent reported attending school, and a few (14 percent) indicated that they simply stayed at home. A minority reported visiting Thai temples in Hong Kong (24 percent) and one reportedly attended church. The apparent low religiosity is probably reflective of two things: (i) the Thai temples are not easily or quickly accessible by public transport; and (ii) Thai Buddhist monks do visit Kowloon City on Sunday mornings, and many Thai workers make offerings to the monks there.



Monks at Kowloon City

Interestingly, none reported other activities that are usually seen as popular among Thai workers – gambling and visiting entertainment venues. While this may be due to the fact that these workers have little money for their own use, it

is more likely that these workers were being coy when interviewed. In Kowloon City, for example, there are a number of legal and illegal karaoke attended by Thais. For example, the Big Gun Bar and Karaoke is well-known and popular on a Sunday afternoon and early evening. Other karaoke in Kowloon City and Shamshuipo are also well-liked, especially as male singers are imported from Thailand.¹⁴ In addition, there are bars and discos in Wanchai, Mongkok and Yaumatei that are known to be frequented by Thais.¹⁵ Discussions with Thai workers also indicated that gambling is a popular activity among their colleagues.



Kowloon City: A popular bar among Thais

¹⁴ It is well known that some of these singers are available for hired sex, and are regularly 'sponsored' by Thai women workers.

¹⁵ Some of these places are known to locals and expatriates as places where Thai women may be 'picked up', and some of these women actively seek to enhance their income through opportunistic prostitution.

Thai workers also attempt to remain in touch with their families in Thailand. Most reported that they contacted their families by telephone, usually using a phone card (80 percent). Very few reported using a mobile phone, although some stated that they were able to use a home phone (22 percent). Just less than half also stated that they wrote letters home.

Travel back to Thailand was not uncommon, and was usually completed during long or annual holidays or between contracts. Nearly two-thirds stated that they had visited Thailand within the past six to 24 months. Still, more than one-third reported that they had never gone back to Thailand, or had not done so for more than three years.

Using wages

As noted above, a major motivation for working in Hong Kong is the relatively high wage received. All respondents reported receiving regular wage payments from their employers, in cash (80 percent), by direct payment to the respondent's bank account (14 percent) or by cheque (4 percent). The wage is obviously used to support families, with large amounts being remitted to Thailand. As shown in Table 15, only three respondents reported that they did not regularly send money to family in Thailand. Most send HK\$2,501 to 3,000 per month. This amount matches the estimates of remittances by domestic workers made by the Thailand Consulate-General of HK\$2,425 (Thai Labour Department, 2003).

Table 15: Remittances to Thailand

Remittance/month (HK\$)	No.	Cumulative %
0	3	6
1-500	0	6
501-1,000	2	10
1,001-1,500	1	12
1,501-2,000	10	32
2,001-2,500	3	38
2,501-3,000	24	86
3,001-3,500	3	92
>3,500	4	100

Most interviewees (84 percent) explained that they sent their funds home through a 'Thai shop'. Only 16 percent used a bank. The shops, located where Thais meet on their days off, are an informal money transfer system, usually charging less than the standard bank fees, and arranging direct payment to the recipient in Thailand. The service is usually faster than that provided by banks. Given that most do not use the banking system, the remittances noted in Table 4 above probably includes considerable under-reporting.

Because respondents report sizeable remittances from their monthly salaries, that they also state keeping relatively little for their own living and personal expenses is not surprising (see Table 16).

Table 16: Amount of salary kept for personal use

HK\$/month	No.	Cumulative %
1-500	10	20
501-1,000	20	60
1,001-1,500	6	72
1,501-2,000	3	78
2,001-2,500	2	82
2,501-3,000	3	88
3,001-3,500	0	88
>3,500	6	100

That the wages earned by migrant workers are important for families in Thailand is indicated in the number of persons this money supports (Tables 17 and 18) and the uses it is put to (Table 19). Almost three-quarters of respondents claim that their remittances support three or more persons. Table 17 indicates that almost all remittances are used to support close family members, while Table 18 shows the multiple uses of the funds returned to Thailand.

Table 17: Number of persons supported by remittances in Thailand

No. of persons supported	No.	Cumulative %
0	6	12
1-2	8	28
3-5	32	92
More than 5	4	100

Table 18: Persons supported by remittances in Thailand

Persons	No.
Parents	35
Children and grandchildren	32
Husband/wife	4
Siblings	21
Nephew	1

It is noticeable that the major use of remitted funds is simply to supplement and support the daily living expenses of relatives. The next most important use is for school expenses, mainly associated with the education of children and siblings. Other important items of expenditure included household renovation (a major task for all families with relatives overseas, enhancing status in the local area) and debt repayment. It is evident that some used the funds for investment in enhanced productive or enhanced earning capacity. Interestingly, relatively little of the remitted money was reportedly used for either luxury or consumer items. This was unexpected. However, it may be that items reported as 'living expenses' may also include some consumer items now considered essential rather than luxuries.

Table 19: Uses made of remittances

Use	No.
Living expenses	44
School education	29
Building/extending/renovating house	12
Savings, Buying land, Farm equipment/stock/seeds	13
Paying off debts	10
Motor vehicles	3
Consumer goods*	1
Medical Expenses	1

*TV, fans, refrigerator. CD/VCD player, etc

The interviewees were also asked about their own savings. Given that so much of their wages are sent to Thailand, it is not surprising to find that 94 percent of respondents reported no savings, and only one reported saving with a bank.

Networking in Hong Kong

It is well-known that Filipino workers in Hong Kong have numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that support them and represent their interests. As far as can be determined, there are just two or three Thai-specific NGOs in Hong Kong, with one of these being more accurately described as a commercial organisation rather than an NGO. Of course, there are NGOs that support the interests of all migrant workers. It should be noted that the Thai temples provide support to Thai workers, while there is also a broader Thai-Chinese community, (especially Thai women married to Hong Kong men) that provides informal support to some Thai workers. However, when Thai workers have a problem and seek advice, none reported seeking the advice from religious figures or NGOs. Neither did they seek advice from employers. Just six percent reported that they would consult an agent. Rather, the most common sources of advice were government, both Thai and Hong Kong, (68 percent) and Thai friends (90 percent). As can be seen in Table 20, when asked to nominate an organisation that supports Thai workers in Hong Kong, official sources were most often mentioned.

Table 20: Support for Thais in Hong Kong

Group or organization	No.
Thai Consulate-General	31
Thai Labour Department Office	47
HK govt offices and services	10
NGOs	7

When further questioned about NGOs in Hong Kong, nearly three-quarters stated that they did not know of any NGO that worked for the interests of Thai workers in Hong Kong. However, 18 percent were able to provide various names of NGOs. It seems, however, that all of those named were the same organisation, the Thai Women Association.

When specifically asked if any of the workers had received any information meant to assist Thai workers in Hong Kong, 58 percent stated that they had not. Of those who had, the most common was a booklet, in the Thai language, prepared by the Hong Kong government (Home Affairs Bureau 2000).

The impact of work in Hong Kong

In surveying one of the aims was to discover how the respondent's work in Hong Kong had generally impacted on the lives of their families in Thailand; the results are shown in Table 21.

Table 20: Comparison of interviewee's general situation/condition before and after migrating to work in Hong Kong

Prior to migrating to Hong Kong, my situation and that of my family in Thailand would be best described as:		
	No.	Cumulative %
Worse off, poorer than most neighbours	16	32
About average. Not wealthy, not poor	33	98
Better than most neighbours/better than average	1	100
Now my situation and that of my family would be best described as:		
Worse off	0	0
About the same/unchanged	15	30
Better off	35	100

There can be little doubt that the majority of respondents felt that their work in Hong Kong had had substantial benefits for their families in Thailand. More work would be required in Thailand to determine the true impact of overseas earnings.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Thailand has been a significant supplier of labour to the migrant society of Hong Kong. With about 13,000 migrants in Hong Kong, Thais are a significant minority, with about half of the migrants being domestic workers.

The survey indicated that the Thais interviewed were reasonably satisfied with their work and living in Hong Kong. While they felt respected by their employers, it was noticed that the workers do not generally feel respected within Hong Kong society. This is due to the fact that most are involved in activities identified as being 'low status'. That is, they are working class occupations.

Thais appear to do better than Indonesian migrants in terms of the wages and conditions they achieve, and report less abuse. This may be due to the fact that the Thai migrants are usually older when they arrive in Hong Kong, and on average are older than Filipina and Indonesian migrant workers. As experienced women and workers, despite low education status, the Thai workers appear able to 'negotiate' reasonable conditions. This may also reflect

the increased democratic space in Thailand and the relative transparency of Thai government operations that affect Thai migrants, even while corruption is still reported in labour recruitment in Thailand.

REFERENCES

ACNielsen 2000, *Omnibus Household Survey in the Fourth Quarter 1999 (Characteristics of the Ethnic Minorities)*, Hong Kong, prepared for the Home Affairs Bureau, 29 August.

Asian Migrant Centre et. al. 2001, *Baseline Research on Racial and Gender Discrimination Towards Filipino, Indonesian and Thai Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: AMC, Asian Domestic Workers Union, Forum of Filipino Reintegration and Savings Groups, Indonesian Migrant Workers Union and Thai Women Association, February.

Asis, Maruja M.B. 2001, 'Return Migration: A Prelude to Another Migration', *NIASnytt*, no. 3, pp. 15-18.

Cairncross, Frances 2002, 'The Longest Journey', Supplement to *The Economist*, 2 November.

Home Affairs Bureau 2000, *Khu mu kan thamngan nai hong kong* [Handbook for working in Hong Kong, translated by the authors as 'Your Guide to Services in Hong Kong'], revised edition, Hong Kong: Home Affairs Bureau, Hong Kong Government.

Hong Kong Government 2002, *2001 Population Census TAB on CD-ROM*, Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department.

ILO 2002, 'Current dynamics of international labour migration: Globalisation and regional integration', About MIGRANT web site, ILO, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/migrant/about/index.htm> (downloaded 9 February 2003).

Malhotra, Kamal 1998, 'Globalisation and the Economic Growth Paradigm: Some Implications for Labour Migration and Mobility', Paper presented to the Conference on Labour Mobility and Migration in China and Asia, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and International Institute of Asian Studies (Leiden) and the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague), Beijing, 17-18 April.

Medel-Anonuevo, Carolyn 1996, 'The Feminization of Migrant Labour in Asia. Disturbing Realities and Its Challenges for Action', Paper presented to the conference Beyond Geo-Politics and Geo-Economics: Towards a New Relationship Between Asia and Europe, Bangkok, 27-29 February.

Ng, Sek-hong and Grace Lee 2000, 'Thai Migrant Workers in Hong Kong', in Supang Chantavanich et. al. (eds.), pp. 210-35.

Office of the Commissioner for Administrative Complaints 1995, *Report of the Investigation on Accommodation for Foreign Domestic Helpers*, Hong Kong, December.

Purcell, Victor 1951, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, London: Oxford University Press.

Ronnås, Per and Bharghavi Ramamurthy 2001, 'International Labour Migration and Globalisation', *NIASnytt*, no. 3, pp. 3-6.

Samarn Laodumrongchai 2000, 'Thai Migrant Workers in Taiwan', in Supang Chantavanich et. al. (eds.), pp. 159-76.

Seri Phongphit and Kevin Hewison 2001, *Village Life: Culture and Transition in Thailand's Northeast*, Bangkok: White Lotus.

Skinner, G. William 1957, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

----- 1958, *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Sovannarith, So 2001, 'International Migration: Some Issues in Cambodia', *NIASnytt*, no. 3, pp. 11-13.

Srawooth Paitoonpong 2002, 'The Labor Markets: An Overview', *TDR/Quarterly Review*, 17, 1, pp. 6-16.

Supang Chantavanich et. al. eds. 2000, *Thai Migrant Workers in East and Southeast Asia, 1996-1997*, Bangkok: Asia Research Centre for Migration.

Supang Chantavanich et. al. eds. 2001, *Thai Migrant Workers in East and Southeast Asia: The Prospects of Thailand's Migration Policy in the Light of the Regional Economic Recession. Returnees to Thailand*, Bangkok: Asia Research Centre for Migration.

Supang Chantavanich 2001, *Thai Migrant Workers in East and Southeast Asia: The Prospects of Thailand's Migration Policy in the Light of the Regional Economic Recession. Final Report*, Bangkok: Asia Research Centre for Migration.

Suwanlee Piampiti 1984, 'Female Migrants in Bangkok Metropolis', in James Fawcett et. al. (eds.), *Women in the Cities of Asia. Migration and Urban Adaptation*, Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 227-46.

Thai Labour Department 2003, Personal communication, by fax, 6 February.

Warren, James Francis 1993, *Ah ku and karayuki-san: prostitution in Singapore (1870-1940)*, Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Wong, Diana with Chong Ching Liang 2000, 'Men Who Built Singapore: Thai Workers in the Construction Industry', in Supang Chantavanich et. al. (eds.), pp. 58-107.