

Risky Business: Debt Bondage International Labour Migration from Northern Thailand

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Debt bondage international labour migration, in which migrants do not pay their recruitment and travel expenses up front, but rather work them off with employers after arriving in the destination country has been and still remains the most notorious form of international labour migration for Thai women. For more than a decade, mass media and human rights reports, as well as many academic reports, have focussed on Thai women working abroad as debt bondage 'sex slaves' (see, for example, 'Thai women lead...' 1989; Heazle 1993; Goldberg 1995; Miki 1995; Vatikiotis et al. 1995; Singhanetra-Renard 1996; Brody et al. 1997; Skrobanek 1996; Skrobanek et al. 1997; Assavanonda 1998; Jinakul 1998; McLean 1998; Phongpaichit et al. 1998; Bales 1999; Brown 2000; HRW 2000; 'Japan doing little...' 2000).¹ In the popular portrayal, Thai women are tricked into going abroad by unscrupulous recruiters, only to find themselves caught in a cycle of debt; they are subsequently 'sold' to various employers, with additional interest accruing with each transaction, and are supposedly rarely if ever able to repay their debts and return home.

The general image that emerges from these articles and research reports is that for some unexplained reason, Thai women are more vulnerable to the false promises of recruiters than Thai men and thus are 'much more liable to be exploited than their male counterparts' (Singhanetra-Renard 1996, 51; see also Assavanonda 1998). Indeed, an overwhelming amount of research on Thai women who migrate abroad focuses on trafficked female sex workers, even in chapters or articles which purportedly address the broader issues of women's international migration or the use of networks in going abroad.²

What is the 'risky business' of debt bondage international labour migration? Why is it an attractive economic strategy for some Northern Thai women? Does this type of international migration inevitably lead to virtual slavery for several years or even a lifetime, as much of the human rights and mass media literature suggests? And finally, how can we begin to move beyond an understanding of debt bondage labour migration that emphasizes the 'naivete' of Thai women tricked into going abroad and the seemingly inevitable exploitation of such women and begin to address broader structural, legal, and human agency factors underlying the persistence of debt bondage labour migration from Thailand?

In answering these questions, I draw on an analysis of Thai laws on labour recruitment and trafficking, a review of the extensive mass media and academic literature on the issues, and participant observation in a hostess club in Japan where Thai women who had used debt bondage to finance their trips abroad were employed.³ In addition, the paper is based on research carried out in several villages in three sub-districts in Phayao and Lamphun provinces in Northern Thailand over a period of 17 months from May 1996 to January 2000. The research included interviews with village leaders, family members left behind by overseas migrants, 104 returned adult overseas migrants who had gone to work in another East or Southeast Asian country,⁴ nine unsuccessful migrants (who tried to go abroad but failed on at least one attempt), seven labour recruiters, and 27 Thai government officials from local,

provincial, and national levels. Returned worker interviews included both male and female migrants; about half of the returned migrants were authorized migrants, while the remaining half were unauthorized migrants.⁵ To protect the anonymity of research participants, the names of the research sub-districts, villages, and interview participants are disguised. Table 1 (attached) shows some basic characteristics of the returned migrant population.

The 'Risky Business' of Debt Bondage Labour Recruitment and Migration

Debt bondage labour recruitment and migration fit under the general rubric of human trafficking, which will be defined here as: 'All acts involved in the recruitment and/or transportation of a woman within and across national borders for work or service by means of violence or threat of violence, abuse of authority or dominant position, debt bondage, deception, or other forms of coercion' (Wijers and Lap-Chew 1997, 36). In much of the literature on Thai women, trafficking is not well defined. Generally, all females involved in the sex and service industries are assumed to have been 'trafficked;' sometimes other female unauthorized migrants are assumed to have been trafficked as well. Skeldon (2000, 8, 17-23), writing about the issue of trafficking within a broader Asian context, discusses what he calls the 'worst forms' of trafficking--selling women and children into slave-like conditions for the purposes of sexual exploitation--which parallel the debt bondage form of recruitment discussed here.

Importantly, trafficking (including debt bondage labour migration) is actually a form of unauthorized labour recruitment and migration. As such, it entails the various problems associated more generally with unauthorized labour migration, such as a lack of basic labour rights and protections against abuse in the destination country, extremely limited ability to obtain assistance from the government of the home country before departure or once overseas, and high levels of insecurity--unauthorized migrants may be arrested, imprisoned, and/or repatriated at any time. In comparison to other forms of unauthorized labour migration and recruitment, trafficking generally is viewed as involving more violence, coercion, and/or exploitation migrants by recruiters or overseas employers. Also, some traffickers appear to have links to international crime and/or drug smuggling (Skeldon 2000).

In Northern Thailand, as in other parts of the world, debt bondage unauthorized recruitment offers some potential migrants an opportunity to access what they believe to be lucrative overseas opportunities. Many potential international labour migrants cannot raise enough money to pay for the travel expenses and recruiter's commission at the time of their migration, fees which often amount to the equivalent of several years' salary for unskilled workers in Thailand. They therefore may arrange to go abroad with a recruiter who pays these expenses up front and then turns them over to an overseas employer who reimburses the recruiter for their travel expenses and pays the recruiter's commission. The migrant workers are then held in 'debt bondage' by the overseas employer, usually for a set number of months or until they have repaid a fixed amount of money which usually includes a very high rate of interest.

A review of the literature on labour migration from Thailand indicates that debt bondage international migrants appear to be almost exclusively women who are recruited to enter the sex or personal service industry in the destination country.⁶ Thai debt bondage migrants are employed in destinations around the world, including Germany, Great Britain, the U.S., Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Malaysia. In my interviews with 104 returned Thai labour migrants who had worked in other East or Southeast Asian countries, twelve women (and no men) went into debt bondage in order to finance their overseas migration. Most had migrated to Japan, while others had gone to Singapore, Taiwan, and Macao (see Table 1).

In my study, debt bondage unauthorized labour migrants paid, on average, the highest amounts for recruitment fees, travel expenses, and interest, totaling U.S. \$11,691, which was more than five times higher than authorized migrants and three times higher than direct pay unauthorized migrants (see Table 1).⁷ The five percent per month rate of interest paid by migrants who used authorized or direct pay unauthorized recruiters, while high, cannot compare to the interest load carried by debt bondage migrants.

In contrast to most human rights and mass media portrayals, nearly all debt bondage unauthorized migrants whom I interviewed knew where they were going, where they would be staying, and what type of work they would be doing overseas (unlike most of the direct pay unauthorized migrants). Most had made verbal agreements or signed contracts for the specific amount of time they would have to spend working for the employer in order to pay back their debt and interest, although two found that the amount they owed had increased once their recruiter had turned them over to their overseas employers. On average, the debt bondage migrants in my study repaid their debts nearly twice as fast as direct pay unauthorized migrants and about 2.5 times faster than authorized migrants.⁸

During the period of their debt bondage, these migrants were, perhaps, at greater risk of abusive or unfair treatment by their overseas employer than were other authorized and unauthorized migrants, mainly because they could not leave the establishment until they had completed their period of debt repayment and because, in a few cases, their debts were increased by their overseas employers for minor infractions like breaking glasses or starting work late or the additional interest charges mentioned above. A couple of debt bondage migrants in my study experienced extreme exploitation such as rape during their period of debt repayment, though some direct pay unauthorized labour migrants and even authorized labour migrants in my study likewise experienced rape or other forms of extreme exploitation.⁹

After repaying their debts, debt bondage migrants earned salaries similar to those of other service or sex industry workers who had gone abroad with direct pay recruiters. Once they had repaid their debts, the debt bondage migrants, like the other unauthorized migrants in my study, were free to switch employers and often did so in order to improve their salaries, benefits, or working conditions or to join a friend at her establishment.¹⁰ As with other

unauthorized migrants, the debt bondage unauthorized migrants I interviewed did not receive assistance from Thai or destination country authorities unless they needed assistance in obtaining papers to replace their expired or false passports when returning home.

Debt Bondage: An Attractive Recruitment Option for Some

Debt bondage labour recruitment is banned in Thailand both under the 1985 Employment and Labour Protection Act, which remains the primary law governing overseas labour migration and recruitment activities in the country, and the 1997 Suppression of Trafficking in Women and Children Act, which prohibits the trafficking of women and children into prostitution within Thailand and outside of Thailand. Despite these bans, as well as informational campaigns warning against unauthorized labour migration and trafficking sponsored by the Thai Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (hereafter Labour Ministry), debt bondage recruitment and labour migration nonetheless persist.

Much of the literature on Thai labour migration and even some Thai government officials focus on a single cause of debt bondage international labour migration and trafficking—namely that unauthorized labour migrants, particularly women, are ‘poorly educated’ and ‘naive’ and thus are easily tricked into migrating abroad as unauthorized or trafficked workers by unscrupulous recruiters (see, for example, Singhanetra-Renard 1996; IOM 1997; Skrobanek et al. 1997; Kongweerat 1998). While a certain number of Thais men and women may be tricked into going abroad illegally each year, it seems likely that many, if not a majority of unauthorized international Thai adult migrants, including those who go abroad using the debt bondage form of payment, have made fairly conscious and fairly informed choices to go abroad as unauthorized migrant workers (Murray 1998; Skeldon 2000; interview transcripts).^{11,12} Rather than reiterating and deconstructing common arguments concerning the ‘naivete’ and ‘lack of worldly experience’ of potential migrants in rural areas, instead, since space is limited, I’d like to focus on a variety of economic, social, and institutional factors that are usually omitted but that likely help explain the persistence of debt bondage international labour recruitment in Northern Thailand.

Several factors motivate many poor rural women (like their better-off male and female counterparts) to try to go abroad by any means, including debt bondage, in order to save money to purchase land, housing, or other material goods for themselves and their families. These factors include limited rural economic opportunities, poor prospects in urban areas of Thailand for rural-urban migrants with low levels of education, traditional and still widely valued social roles of providing material support for families and parents (Muecke 1992; Curran 1995), and the climate of growing consumerism in Thailand. Because debt bondage recruitment does not require migrants to cover recruitment fees and travel expenses up front, this is the most accessible mode of recruitment, and perhaps the *only* one, for women whose families are too poor to be able to pay recruitment fees from their savings and who lack land or houses of sufficient value to serve as collateral for local money lenders. As one debt bondage migrant to Japan put it, ‘I went into debt because I did not

have money. . .so I had to go with that (debt bondage) recruiter. Those who do not have money go with that kind of recruiter.'

Another attractive feature of this mode of recruitment mentioned by some of my informants was that it reduced the *financial risk* involved with overseas migration for potential migrants and their families. Because the recruiters or overseas employers covered the migrants' travel expenses and initial recruitment fees, the recruiters or overseas employers bore most of the initial financial risk. Thus, if the migrant failed to gain entry into the destination country or was arrested prior to the end of the specified debt repayment period, neither the migrant nor her family was held liable for the remaining debt. A couple of the debt bondage migrants I interviewed were arrested and repatriated prior to repaying their initial debts. Although they had to return home with little more than the money they had saved from tips, they explained that their net loss was far lower than had they tried to go abroad through an authorized recruiter or a direct pay unauthorized recruiter, who require payment of recruitment fees at the time of migration, because they and their families had not borrowed from local lenders to finance their recruitment costs.¹³

Debt bondage labour recruitment was also attractive to many in my study because, especially in areas with a history of debt bondage labour migration, it was far easier and faster to arrange to go abroad through a debt bondage recruiter than an authorized (legal) recruiter. In migrant-sending villages and sub-districts, social networks between former, current, and potential debt bondage migrants improved the flow of information about overseas opportunities and recruitment options. Moreover, current and returned migrants oftentimes were able and willing to introduce potential migrants to recruiters known to be trustworthy, inexpensive, and/or highly successful, reducing the financial and time costs of making recruitment arrangements (interview transcripts; see also Singhanetra-Renard 1992; Chantaraprayoon 1993).

Like social networks, direct recruitment also helped reduce the time spent in arranging to go abroad. The high demand for female sex and service workers by overseas employers in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, in conjunction with the high salaries earned by many such workers, and the increased demand for overseas employment in some less well-off migrant-sending communities has created a situation in which recruiters can earn extremely high profits by funding the travel and recruitment costs for poor young women who agree to work in the sex/service industry abroad in order to repay their sizeable debts. To capitalize on potentially lucrative recruitment opportunities, many international and Thai recruiters go directly to poor villages and sub-districts where they or their contacts have recruited in the past, where they are likely to encounter young women willing to consider going abroad as debt bondage migrants.

Finally, like other unauthorized Thai migrants, debt bondage migrants bypass lengthy contract approval processes, a pre-departure orientation at the Labour Ministry, and need not obtain police and health clearances or skills certification oftentimes required of authorized labour migrants. Avoiding time-

consuming regulations that the govern authorized labour recruitment and migration, together with extensive social networks linking potential migrants to current and former debt bondage migrants and recruiters and direct recruitment make debt bondage migration much faster than recruitment through legal channels, likely contributing to the popularity and persistence of debt bondage international migration.

Debt bondage was also popular for many migrants and potential migrants because of its high earning potential (interview transcripts; Watanabe 1998). Once they had completed the initial period of debt repayment, the debt bondage migrants in my study who worked in the sex or service industries typically earned as much as other unauthorized migrants who worked in these sectors and far more than authorized or unauthorized migrants working in other types of employment. Unless they were arrested and repatriated, debt bondage migrants could choose to stay abroad for longer periods than authorized migrants, who usually had only one or two year contracts that generally could not be extended. Thus, on average, the overall earnings of debt bondage migrants were far higher than those of authorized labour migrants and were similar to those earned by sex/service industry workers who had gone abroad through direct pay unauthorized recruiters (see Table 1).

Cumulative causation also appears to play a role in the continuation of debt bondage form of labour recruitment. The families of current and returned debt bondage migrants demonstrate the economic 'success' and conspicuous consumption enabled by migrant remittances, which help create feelings of relative deprivation among families that have not sent one or more members abroad (Massey et al. 1998). For instance, in one economically disadvantaged research sub-district with a significant history of debt bondage out-migration, numerous former and current female international migrants had met with apparent financial success abroad, where income-earning opportunities are generally far more lucrative than those in Bangkok, Pattaya, or other Thai resorts that had drawn women from the area in past decades. Debt bondage migrants had purchased land, houses, vehicles, and luxury goods for themselves or their families, adopting *thansamay* (modern, up-to-date) commodified styles and consumption patterns that increasingly signify economic success and social prestige in Thai society (Mills 1999). Some had even married foreigners whom they had met while working abroad, helping improve their own and sometimes their families' socio-economic status in the longer term.¹⁴ Thus, for many lower-class families, working abroad as debt bondage sex/service workers had become an acceptable temporary career choice, enabling poor women to fill desirable social roles and earn religious merit by supporting their parents and other family members, making donations to the local Buddhist temple, and sponsoring the ordination of novice monks (Muecke 1992; Peracca et al. 1998; interview transcripts).¹⁵ The economic, social, and religious benefits and potential for social mobility associated with debt bondage labour migration outweighed at least some of the social stigma associated with such work.

This brief discussion indicates that not just 'tricky' recruiters exploiting 'naive' potential migrants, but rather a variety of economic, social, and

institutional factors likely contribute to the spread and persistence of debt bondage labour migration from Northern Thailand.

Trafficking and Debt Bondage Labour Migration from Thailand: Contextualization and Critique

For those in my study, debt bondage labour migration presented certain risks and disadvantages, such as expensive recruitment costs and a risk of having the debt repayment period extended because of high interest or new debts added on, as was experienced by two of the women I interviewed. But, many of my informants benefited from lower initial financial risk, speedier departure, and attractive salaries abroad. Moreover, none of the debt bondage migrants in my study faced the 'inescapable sexual slavery' so often a topic of concern in the literature on female labour migration from Thailand.

Why do my findings differ to such a great extent from the portrayals of the 'sexual slavery' of Thai female migrants circulating in the mass media and human rights literature? Part of the difference may be explained by our different interview populations. It may be that my interview population excluded those who experienced the most difficulties abroad, such as those who were 'sold' from club to club and never returned to Thailand. It may also be that my informants under-reported problems they had experienced.¹⁶ The sampling approach utilized by many other human rights, mass media, and even academic reports also appears to be biased, but in a different way.¹⁷ Such studies typically focus on the anecdotal cases collected from women who have approached NGOs or the Thai embassy for assistance and thus emphasize those migrants who were *most* exploited, excluding those who had fewer problems or experienced various benefits from the debt bondage form of migration (Murray 1998). Murray (1998, 55) argues that women interviewed after having been arrested or detained for working as prostitutes abroad may *claim* to have been tricked into going abroad as prostitutes since prostitution is illegal in Thailand and most destination countries and they might not want to admit to knowingly breaking the law. In other cases, she argues, researchers may 'selectively reinterpret' women's statements to suggest that more women were tricked into going abroad as debt bondage migrants than was actually the case (since this is the story many 'experts' and reporters wish to emphasize in making their arguments in favour of legislation and funding to prohibit trafficking). Particularly with small, non-random samples, selection biases can strongly influence findings. Results from such studies should be interpreted with extreme caution, with conclusions drawn only in reference to the study population and findings critically examined in relation to other surveys or the broader literature.

Importantly, the overemphasis on the 'inevitably' exploitative nature of debt bondage labour migration and trafficking biases our understanding of rural Thai women and men and their involvement in international labour migration. Each year, significant and increasing numbers of Thai women and men are going abroad for employment through licensed recruiters or are arranging their own legal labour migration directly with foreign employers.¹⁸ Moreover, significant numbers of Thai women and men are going abroad for employment

through direct pay unauthorized recruiters (see Sobieszczyk [2000] for a review of these labour flows).¹⁹ The focus on debt bondage labour migration means that other types of international labour migration and recruitment receive less attention, though these significantly impact the Thai economy, villages, families, and labour migrants themselves.

Furthermore, the over-emphasis on the human rights abuses associated with trafficking masks the fact that virtually *all* types of international labour recruitment involve exploitation to varying degrees (see Sobieszczyk [2000a, 2000b], Skeldon [2000], and Laodumrongchai [2000] for further discussions). Distinctions between trafficking, unauthorized, and even authorized labour recruitment and migration are blurry at best. 'Legal' (authorized) labour recruitment in Thailand almost always involves some illegal practices. The most common example, one that is openly acknowledged by Thai Labour Ministry officials, is that licensed recruitment agencies inevitably charge potential migrants far above legally permissible fees. Other licensed recruiters collect 'contract completion' insurance, which may or may not be returned to migrants who complete their contracts, or collect the recruitment fees from more potential migrants than available positions, delaying the departure of potential migrants for months or even years. Foreign employers 'approved' by the Thai Labour Ministry sometimes refuse to pay for overtime or send their workers home before their contracts have expired if the economy is bad. Overworked Labour Ministry officials overseas frequently are unable to respond to authorized Thai labour migrants' complaints or request for assistance (Jones and Pardthaisong 1999; interview transcripts). In the broader study from which this paper is drawn, a comparison of different types of labour recruitment and international migration indicates that the risks to personal health and safety experienced by debt bondage labour migrants were not significantly different than those experienced by sex workers who went abroad as direct pay unauthorized migrants, or, indeed, from workers who migrated legally to factories in the Middle East or Taiwan, where many were exposed to risks ranging from dangerous machinery, toxic chemicals in dye baths, chromium in bicycle factories, the advances of amorous bosses, or overly demanding employers who sometimes violated labour contracts or spoken agreements (see Sobieszczyk [2000a] for a detailed discussion).

The focus on trafficking as inevitably leading to exploitation and 'sexual slavery' fuels and appears to be fuelled by the interest of many middle class feminist groups in Southeast and East Asia and destination countries. Such feminist groups claim to represent sex workers and their interests, though frequently the political agenda of such groups is aimed at abolishing prostitution and hence at constraining the economic options of international migrants.²⁰ Many of these groups employ an emotional discourse to forward their abolitionist agenda. Others are based on the ideology of MacKinnon (1987) and Barry (1995) that defines all sex as prostitution and all prostitution as a violation of human rights. Murray (1998, 58) warns that anti-trafficking campaigns in Australia have been overly focussed on prohibiting prostitution, hindering a full analysis of the causes and outcomes of trafficking in particular contexts and instead helping to:

‘. . .perpetuate the stereotype of Asian workers as passive and diseased. Clients are encouraged to think of Asian workers as helpless victims who are unable to resist, so they may be more likely to violate the rights of these workers. The campaigns also encourage racism towards Asian workers within the industry. . .and in the general community where Asian workers form an ostracized new ‘underclass’ without equal rights.’

The focus on the human rights abuses of trafficking and debt bondage labour migration has, in fact, had the significant impact of garnering attention and financial support for prohibiting trafficking (and prostitution) from the Clinton administration as well as the UN and various governments in Southeast Asia, including the Thai government. But, the over-emphasis on recruiters who trick ‘unknowing’ Thai women into taking their chances abroad and on the seemingly inevitable exploitation of such women has had the unfortunate impact of drawing attention away from the structural and gender inequalities within the global capitalist economic system that make overseas labour opportunities in prostitution, domestic work, and the service industry the most attractive employment opportunities available to many poor rural women. It has drawn attention from the structural inequities in the Thai system that have limited and continue to limit access to high quality education and labour markets within Thailand for many young Thai and ethnic minority women (and men) in rural areas. It has drawn attention from the agency of women who, in part because their economic options at home are limited, actively choose to go abroad as debt bondage migrants in order to capitalize on higher paying economic opportunities and hopefully improve their own and often their family’s socioeconomic status.²¹ And finally, it has drawn attention from the restrictions on authorized labour migration, which, in the context of demand for foreign workers among overseas employers and demand for well-paid positions abroad among potential migrants, raise potential profits from labour recruitment, attracting unauthorized recruiters and organized crime into the business of labour recruiting and trafficking and likely increasing the degree of coercion and exploitation experienced by some male and female labour migrants.

In the end, it is likely that the greatest opportunity for halting debt bondage labour recruitment, trafficking, and unauthorized labour migration will involve enacting broader economic, political, social, and legal change within the context of the international labour migration system and the global political economy. In order to move towards such change and towards addressing labour exploitation in all its forms, in my view, we will have to move beyond the narrow human rights focus of much of the literature on Thai international labour migration and trafficking to date. Instead, as I have attempted to do here, we will need to acknowledge and take into account the diversity of experiences of debt bondage migrants and trafficked migrants in different service and sex industries, explore in greater depth the various causes of trafficking and why it is perpetuated in particular settings, and situate the experiences of trafficked workers in the context of other types of labour migration--both authorized and unauthorized--that also frequently involve exploitation to varying degrees.

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Table 1. Percentage of Migrants Who Used Authorized, Direct Pay Unauthorized, and Debt Bondage Unauthorized Recruiters to Go Abroad for Employment in Another East or Southeast Asian Country, by Selected Demographic and Migration Information

| Characteristic | Type of migrant | | |
|---|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Authorized | Direct pay unauthorized | Debt bondage unauthorized |
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 49.0% | 31.7% | 100.0% |
| Overseas destination, most recent trip | | | |
| Brunei | 7.8% | -- | -- |
| Hong Kong ^a | 5.9% | 7.3% | -- |
| Japan | 5.9% | 63.4% | 50.0% |
| Macau ^a | -- | -- | 8.3% |
| Malaysia | -- | 4.9% | -- |
| Singapore | -- | 7.3% | 33.3% |
| South Korea | -- | 9.8% | -- |
| Taiwan | 80.4% | 7.3% | 8.3% |
| Year of arrival in destination, most recent trip | | | |
| Mean | | | |
| Range | 1993-94 1984-97 | 1990-91 1983-97 | 1992-93 1988-97 |
| Total cost of recruit. fee/travel expenses (U.S. \$) ^b | | | |
| Mean | \$2,334 | \$3,591 | \$11,691 |
| Median | \$2,932 | \$2,390 | \$8,048 |
| Range | 0-\$3,984 | 0-\$9,960 | \$398-\$31,759 |
| Length of time to repay debt from recruitment fees/travel expenses (months) | | | |
| Mean | | | |
| Median | 9.9 | 7.0 | 3.7 |
| Range | 10.6 0-43.0 | 6.0 0-33 | 3.0 0.3-7.0 |

Table 1 continued, Percentage of Migrants Who Used Authorized, Direct Pay Unauthorized, and Debt Bondage Unauthorized Recruiters to Go Abroad for Employment in Another East or Southeast Asian Country, by Selected Demographic and Migration Information

| | | | |
|---|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| First primary occupation overseas | | | |
| Construction worker | 7.8% | -- | -- |
| Unskilled factory worker | 72.5% | 19.5% | -- |
| Skilled labourer | 5.9% | 9.8% | -- |
| Servant | 7.8% | 2.4% | -- |
| Cleaner | 2.0% | 2.4% | -- |
| Restaurant worker | 3.9% | 48.7% | -- |
| Bar/massage/sex worker ^c | -- | 12.2% | 100.0% |
| Market seller | -- | 4.9% | -- |
| Approximate monthly salary at first primary job overseas, without overtime, tips, or room and board (U.S.\$) ^{b,d} | | | |
| Mean | | | |
| Median | \$528 | \$1,070 | \$1,903 |
| Range | \$520 | \$1,093 | \$1,747 |
| Missing cases | \$84-1,287 | \$0-\$3,790 | \$81-\$3,984 |
| | -- | --- | 4 |
| Estimated total value of monthly remittances and gifts/money brought home in person (U.S.\$) ^e | | | |
| Mean | \$13,367 | \$62,960 | \$32,509 |
| Median | \$11,905 | \$51,969 | \$4,813 |
| Range | \$638-\$47,063 | \$0-\$213,342 | \$0-\$226,290 |
| Number of informants | 51 | 41 | 12 |

SOURCE: Interview Data

^aAt the time of my initial interviews, Hong Kong and Macau had not yet been reincorporated into the People's Republic of China.

^bRecruitment costs and salaries are calculated using the exchange rate for the year of departure. They vary widely based on country of destination, year of departure, and type of occupation abroad.

^cThis broader category is used rather than 'sex industry' because not all of those who work in hostess clubs (bars) in Japan are involved in prostitution.

^dFor debt bondage unauthorized migrants, the monthly salary at the first primary job is reported following the period of debt repayment.

^eThe estimates were calculated by multiplying mean monthly remittances by total number of months abroad plus the total estimated value of gifts and money brought home by the migrant in person. Because migrants may have had trouble estimating or recalling the amount of remittances or the total value of gifts and money brought home in person or may have sent remittances irregularly, these should be treated as rough estimates.

Notes

¹Clearly, the issues of trafficking and labour migration are multidimensional. A parallel discussion about women and children 'trafficked' into Thailand from Myanmar, China, and Laos has emerged but will not be discussed here because of space constraints.

²Important exceptions to the tendency to focus solely on trafficking include Angsuthanasombat (2001), who provides a more balanced historical case study of Thai women's labour migration, including authorized and unauthorized overseas labour migration and excluding sex workers, Chantavanich et al. (1999), who briefly discuss several forms of migration of Thai women to Germany, including marriage migration, trafficking, and recruitment through unauthorized agents, and Sobieszczyk (2000a), who provides a historically grounded comparison of Thai men's and women's authorized and unauthorized overseas labour migration to destinations in East and Southeast Asia.

³The participant observation illustrated that not all Thai debt bondage migrants are involved in the 'sex industry' since some of the bar hostesses I met during my participant observation in Japan were married to Japanese or Thai men and so limited their duties strictly to chatting or singing with clients in the bar, apparently without slipping into prostitution as a sideline (see Table 1, note c).

⁴To be able to contact a range of male and female migrants (including those who worked in private households and the sex industry, who were expected to be more difficult to contact directly in overseas destinations), and to reduce interviewing costs, the overall project focused on interviewing returned labour migrants and those who had tried to go abroad but failed on at least one attempt. The sample is likely biased because it omits persons who did not return to their Northern Thai villages because of illness, death, or subsequent moves, though my informal village migration censuses indicate that these omissions are probably not too high. Efforts were made to include former labour migrants who had married while abroad but returned for a visit during my time in each village. Interview subjects were identified through a combination of village overseas migration censuses conducted by the researcher and through the help of other returned migrants and villagers. Two male returned migrants and four female returned migrants refused to be interviewed.

⁵Unauthorized (undocumented, unofficial, illegal) migrants are those who migrate abroad with the assistance of an unauthorized recruitment agency, and/or who lack proper passports and/or visas and/or work permits, or who obtain employment after entering on tourist, transit, or student visas, or who overstay visas or work permits. In this paper, the general category of unauthorized migrants is differentiated into two groups--those who pay their recruitment fees at the time of migration (direct pay unauthorized migrants) and those who work off their recruitment fees and travel expenses in the destination country (debt bondage unauthorized migrants), a sub-category of 'trafficked' workers.

⁶This contrasts with Chinese debt bondage labour migration to the U.S., which includes both male and female debt bondage migrants (Kwong 1997).

⁷My interviews indicate that in the mid- to late-1990s, the cost of entering Japan as a debt bondage migrant was even higher, ranging from U.S. \$38,000 to \$76,000 (confirmed by Singhanetra-Renard [1996]; Srivatananukulkit et al. [1996]; Watanabe [1998]). 'Ms. Linda,' a debt bondage migrant to Japan explained the wide range in prices this way: 'If you are fat, they lower the price. The price is cheap. If your body is small, you can go, but it is a little bit expensive. . . Those who are beautiful can "find money" (slang for earning money through sex or service work) to pay off their commission quickly. . . if a person is very fat or if her face and eyes are not beautiful, it is a little harder to "find money" (through sex or service work)' and so the commission is lower.

⁸This is likely due, in part, to the fact that employers withheld their entire salaries (excluding tips, room, and board) during the debt repayment period, and to differences in wages, which are related to different occupations abroad and the labour markets in destination countries.

⁹Authorized and direct pay unauthorized migrants experienced various sorts of exploitation, including rape, beatings, non-payment of wages, and violations of benefits, wage levels, and rights contained in contracts or in their verbal agreements with employers. Because of space constraints, these cases will not be discussed in greater detail here (see Sobieszczyk [2000a] for further details).

¹⁰The freedom to switch employers and thus resolve work problems on their own was cited by both authorized and unauthorized migrants as one of the main benefits of going abroad through unauthorized channels, since authorized migrants frequently are unable to obtain assistance in

resolving problems with wages, working conditions, and abusive employers from recruiters, Thai officials, and/or destination country officials (interview transcripts; Jones and Pardthaisong 1999).

¹¹Thai children and youth are also sometimes the victims of unauthorized international labour recruiters and traffickers and likely lack full information and/or freedom of choice, given their age, parental and social pressure, and so on. This issue will not be considered here.

¹²Going abroad through unauthorized channels, and, in particular, involvement in prostitution may pose certain risks to migrants' health and well-being. But, such risks are not unique to debt bondage migrants, since other unauthorized migrants who enter the sex trade face similar risks. Also, as I have argued elsewhere, authorized, direct pay unauthorized, and debt bondage unauthorized Thai labour migrants all face varying degrees of exploitation and health risks from overseas labour migration (see Sobieszczyk 2000a, 2000b). Prior to departure, the debt bondage migrants in my study appear not to have been greatly concerned with potential health risks, the risks associated with unauthorized labour migration, or the possibility of being caught in a cycle of debt with their overseas employers.

¹³Consider, for example, 'Mr. Makam,' who borrowed money from other villagers to pay an unauthorized recruiter U.S. \$7,500 to take him to Japan. On his first attempt, he was detained and repatriated by Japanese Immigration officials before he left the airport. He borrowed a further sum and paid the recruiter an additional U.S. \$12,300, expecting to be taken to Japan via Moscow. Instead, Russian authorities detained both Mr. Makam and his recruiter and eventually repatriated them to Thailand. Although Mr. Makam had been unable to successfully enter Japan, the recruiter refused to refund his recruitment fees. Five years later, Mr. Makam and his wife were still struggling to repay their debts to local moneylenders. Other potential authorized and unauthorized migrants in my study experienced similar situations.

¹⁴See Mills (1999) and Sobieszczyk (2002) for further discussions of labour out-migration from villages as a means of economic and social mobility.

¹⁵One of my research villages provided a particularly vivid illustration of the connection between the international migration of sex and service industry workers and religious merit making. Despite the general poverty of the village, where, according to the village chief's estimate, approximately 40 per cent of households were landless, the temple complex was the largest and most beautifully landscaped of all of the villages in my study. It boasted several new buildings, a sizable ornamental pond, and a very ornate enclosure wall and gate. Village informants indicated that remittances from sex/service industry workers had funded most of these temple improvements. In fact, while I was in the village, I attended a celebration in honor of the newly rebuilt temple gate, funded by a U.S. \$1,486 donation from a woman who was living in Japan and apparently working as a sex worker.

¹⁶Despite my efforts to minimize power and status differences between the research participants and myself, and to establish rapport by living in research villages, a completely equitable research relationship was impossible to attain because of my higher economic and social status and because of my position as a foreigner. This may have contributed to under-reporting of problems. It is not clear that debt bondage unauthorized migrants would have been more likely to under-report problems than direct pay unauthorized migrants or authorized migrants. Follow-up interviews were used to clarify confusing or contradictory statements made by research participants.

¹⁷One problem with assessing the sampling issue is that most mass media, human rights, and even some academic reports provide little or no discussion of the sampling method employed.

¹⁸In 2000, over 193,000 authorized Thai migrants were employed abroad (NOESD 2001). Males vastly outnumber females in authorized migration flows from Thailand, except for certain destinations including Hong Kong, Japan, and Saipan Island (Punpuing and Archavanitkul, 1996).

¹⁹The out-flow of unauthorized labour migrants from Thailand is also large. Estimates of unauthorized labour migration flows vary, but researchers note that unauthorized labour migrants comprise about forty to sixty per cent of the overall migration streams from Thailand (Martin 1996, 4) and vastly outnumber authorized labour migrants in some receiving countries, such as Japan (Lim and Abella 1994, 225). Thai women are particularly likely to be involved in unauthorized migration to countries such as Japan and Germany (Srivatananukulkit et al. 1996; Punpuing and Archavanitkul 1996, 8).

²⁰The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) exemplifies this approach. CATW defines all sex traded for money or other resources as 'sexual exploitation' and violence against women and forwards an agenda aimed at eliminating prostitution, sex trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

²¹Clearly, Thai debt bondage migrants cannot be constructed as a homogenous 'powerless' group or

merely as victims of their particular cultural and socio-economic system. As Mohanty (1988, 66) points out, such objectification of 'third world' women needs to be named and challenged.