

Chinese Transnational Migration in the Region: An Update

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The Volume of New Chinese Migrants

Four estimated figures from relevant Chinese official authorities and international organisations could be cited to show the size of ethnic Chinese in the world.

1960s:	12.7 million
1985:	22 million
1999:	33 million
2009:	45 million

Clearly, the past three decades have recorded a surprising increase of Chinese emigration, which means around 25 million new Chinese migrants have joined the transnational migration waves. The latest estimated figure of 45 million migrants should include those emigrated from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau.

Where Are They from?

Most of people who are not familiar with China or the China studies would be curious to query about the source region of new Chinese migrants. Historically, Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang on the coastal south China were the major migrant sending regions, and that is why frequently people could observe the five major dialect groups of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, i.e. Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese. Consequently, the first group of Chinese citizens who joined the transnational migration wave in late 1970s were all from these three Chinese coastal provinces, followed by student migrants from big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. On the other hand, Chinese *Dongbei* or Northeast China has quietly come into view since mid 1980s as a new migrant sending region. Nevertheless, the new migrants from the three *Dongbei* provinces (Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang) are quite different from their counterparts from Fujian and Zhejiang. Normally the *Dongbei* migrants are not young anymore, and most of them are former laid-off workers from

different state-owned heavy industry enterprises. A great many laid-off workers are thus forced to seek livings overseas. In other words, currently there are three major migrant sending regions in China, i.e. central Fujian (the Fuzhou region in particular), South Zhejiang (Wenzhou and Qingtian) and Northeast China provinces.

What is more is that the emigration snow ball has been spreading to other parts of mainland China, and residents from inland provinces and remote frontier regions such as Xinjiang, Gansu, Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Sichuan and Ningxia have gradually been involved into the transnational migration waves since 1990s.

Why Suddenly the New Chinese Transnational Migration Emerged in the late 1970s?

Two key factors could be advanced to explain the rapid rise in China's transnational migration over the past three decades. First, the emigration ban that had been in effect for 40 years on the mainland was finally lifted by the Chinese government in the late 1970s when China opened its door to the outside world, which in turn triggered a large scale of population outflow. Second, many Western countries changed their migration policies by giving up earlier discriminative requirements while adopting quota system or qualification system in the hope to attract skilled foreign labours to work in a certain service sectors. As what had successfully worked over the past few centuries, coupled with the family chain migration, push-and-pull factors lead more and more Chinese youths to emigrate countries overseas.

Migration Direction Has Been Slightly Changed from Southeast Asian Countries to the Developed and Underdeveloped Countries

For more than four centuries, countries of Southeast Asia have been the traditional and major destinations for Chinese immigrants with more than 85 percent ethnic Chinese congregating in the region. Such a scenario, however, has been changed since 1978, when China launched economic reform and a huge number of mainland Chinese were allowed to migrate to other countries. One of the new features exhibited by the new Chinese international migration wave is that majority of new Chinese migrants target at economically developed countries in North America and Europe, especially the United States, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain, as well as countries of other continents such as Australia, New Zealand, Russia, Japan and South Korea. Meanwhile, continents that have rarely been visited by Chinese migrants over the past few centuries such as South America, Africa and Middle East have recently witnessed a significant growth of new Chinese migrants, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, South Africa, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are in

particular. As a result, new Chinese migrant communities in North America, Europe, Australia, Japan and South Korea have increased rapidly in size, and Southeast Asia is not the leading receiving region for the Chinese migrants anymore.

Four Types of New Chinese Migrants

Four types of migrants could be observed among new Chinese migrants.

Type A is concerned with student migrants and visiting academic staff who mainly emigrated to North America, Europe, Australia, Japan and Singapore. According to the statistics issued by China's Ministry of Education, more than 700,000 Chinese students and scholars were sent to study by the government in developed countries from 1980 to 2003. Of them, 74 percent or 527,400 have chosen to emigrate and assimilate into host societies. In addition, more than 100,000 well-educated dependents have moved to other countries to accompany their couples studying overseas. In other words, more than one million students and scholars had left China by 2006, demonstrating that student migration is one of the major emigration patterns in China. Type B refers to business migrants, including investment migrants, commercial representatives stationed in countries overseas and various traders and peddlers. Type C is related to contract worker migrants. Unlike migrants of other types, contract workers have to return to China when the construction projects are completed in accordance with the Chinese government regulations. Majority of them, however, have become the overstayed migrants and would not return to China when their contracts expired. So far about 3.75 million Chinese contract worker migrants are working in different countries overseas. Of them, more than 200,000 are in Southeast Asia. These figures only refer to legal contract worker migrants sent by the Chinese authorities. The numbers of illegal worker migrants should be much more than the legal ones. Type D includes unskilled labour migrants and farmers who are mainly from rural China, and many of them are undocumented or illegal migrants.

Chinese Emigration to Southeast Asia since 1980

Prior to 1978, there were two small new transnational migration waves from mainland China. The first wave was related to thousands of young intellectuals from frontier provinces of southwest China who smuggled across the border to join the armies of Community Party of Burma in late 1960s and early 1970s. Majority of them have either returned to China in the late 1970s or died in the battlefield of northern Burma with a small number still working in the Shan States. The second wave was from south Fujian generated by the Philippine presidential decree dated 11 April 1975, which gave a green light to the naturalisation of ethnic Chinese. Thousands of Jinjiang Hokkiens thus smuggled into the Philippines with the assistance of their relatives and

fellow villagers based in the Islands.

The large scale migrant flow from China to Southeast Asia, nevertheless, did not come into view until the mid 1980s. Thailand and the Philippines were the two major destination countries during this period. As traditionally ethnic Chinese of Thailand are Teochew people from East Guangdong while most of Hokkien Chinese can be found in the Philippines, the social networks embedded in the two dialectal groups as a result assisted a large number of Chinese citizens to have successfully smuggled into the two Southeast Asian societies. Earlier illegal migrants would purchase the ID cards of deceased Filipinos from the remote islands or villages and stay in the Islands with faked identities. On the other hand, the years following 1992 saw another group of wealthy new Chinese migrants moving into the Islands when the Philippine government announced a new investment migration policy, granting SIRV or permanent residential right to any foreigner who is able to invest USD75,000 in the country. In 1997 alone, more than 10,000 Hokkien Chinese were recorded to migrate into the Philippines from south Fujian with this new policy. It is estimated that currently there are around 150,000 new Chinese migrants in the Philippines and majority are illegal migrants.

In the mid 1990s, another wave of new Chinese migrants emerged in Southeast Asia, and Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia became the major receiving countries. With the encouragement of Taiwan government to divert the Taiwanese investment from mainland China to countries of Southeast Asia, large number of Taiwanese businessmen shifted their businesses and manufacturing centres to the region, which in turn facilitated the population movement from Taiwan to Southeast Asian countries, especially Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Cambodia.

In the meantime, Singapore government tried her best to attract quality Chinese migrants from Malaysia, Hong Kong and Australia due to the rapid decrease of ethnic Chinese in the country. 25,000 PR quotas were introduced in 1989 by the Singapore authorities to attract wealthy businessmen and skilled labours from Hong Kong. Of them, it is estimated that about half of the quotas have been taken. In addition, quality secondary school students have purposely been attracted by the Singapore government from mainland China since the mid 1990s with financial subsidies being provided by the government or government-linked enterprises. According to the contracts signed between the two sides, Chinese student who accepts the Singapore government scholarship should serve the country for at least six years after his or her

graduation. Consequently, every year several thousands of Chinese students would come to study in Singapore. Soon afterwards, a unique migrant group called *Peidu Mama* or Accompanying Studying Mothers quietly came into existence as the Singapore government permits Chinese students aged between 6 and 16 to have their mothers accompanied to take care of their daily lives while studying in the country. In 2006, the number of this special female migrant group was around 6,000. It is estimated that currently there are 250,000 to 300,000 new Chinese migrants working and living in Singapore while annually about 80,000 contract workers are imported from China.

In Malaysia, local citizens were forbidden from visiting mainland China before 1990. And the mid 1990s saw early new Chinese migrants moving into the country. Overstayed tourism migration, marriage migration, student migration and contract worker migration are the four major transnational migration patterns. According to the Malaysian government statistics, more than 6,000 Chinese brides had migrated to Malaysia by the end of 2005. Meanwhile, the data issued by the local Chinese embassy shows that currently 20,000 to 40,000 Chinese labours are illegally working in the country.

In mainland Southeast Asia, new Chinese migrants could be seen in most of the countries, especially in Burma, Cambodia and Laos. Apart from businessmen, a huge number of Chinese contract workers are working for the different infrastructure construction projects financed or assisted by the Chinese government. What is more interesting to note is that many plantations owned and operated by new Chinese agricultural migrants from Sichuan, Hunan, Guizhou and Yunnan have quietly emerged in the villages of Golden Triangle region bordering with China. In some mountainous villages of northern Burma, hundreds of Chinese migrants are from the same village of rural China. And almost all of them are illegal migrants, which presents people with a new challenge insofar as the NTS in the region is concerned.