

Labor migration to China in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam - causes from the perspective of international migration

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Abstract: *Migration in general and international migration in particular are complicated debate topics. From the perspective of international migration, the paper uncovers causes of current labor migration to China of Vietnam's ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous region through a qualitative research in Ha Giang and Lang Son provinces.*

Keywords: Labor Migration, Ethnic Minority, International Migration, Northern Mountainous Region of Vietnam

Introduction

The northern mountainous region of Vietnam owns a divergence of population and inhabitation history. This is also the area of free migrants to economic regions throughout the country. This migration contributes to stabilizing the livelihood of a part of the population, yet, imposes many implications in the sustainable development strategy in both countries of departure and destination. Besides the migration to other provinces within the country, there has been a cross-border labor migration, especially in provinces bordering China. What has caused the migration flow? From the perspective of international migration, what are the similarities and differences

among the causes of this migration? The article should contribute to answering these questions.

1. Causes of international migration

There are many different causes of human migration, each of which often contains both pushing and pulling factors. For international migration, according to traditional perception, motivation for migrants is associated with the country they want to leave, “customarily related to difficult situations that push people to move. Pulling factors are often defined by the attractions in more developed countries/regions” (Nghiem Tuan Hung, 2012).

However, in reality, besides “long-term migration” due to some reasons “making

people to travel to new places”, there are “temporary migration” and “seasonal migration” within temporary migrant groups who are in search for work in a certain period of time.

According to the study by Nghiem Tuan Hung (2012) and Vo Thi Minh Le (2009), international migration comes from several reasons:

First, income differences: attractiveness of developed economies and the low economic conditions together with poverty are factors that motivate the consideration for leaving.

Second, disparities in the demand for human resources: between developed and developing countries, there often exist disparities in labor force mainly related to the industrial and agricultural sectors: when labor in the agricultural sector is surplus redundant, they move gradually to the industrial sector. Some believe that international migration is introduced due to developed countries’ demand for frequent and permanent migrant workers (Vo Thi Minh Le, 2009: 34). In addition, the rapid population growth rate in developing countries is an indirect cause of international migration, when the working-age population exceeds that of market demand.

Third, migration is accompanied by the desire to develop and diversify economic capabilities: Not only do households want to maximize their expected income, but also to minimize risks and reduce the burden if any failure due to the local market, because these failures would directly affect the welfare and hinder the very household economic development.

Forth, war, poverty, economic inequality, and so on may give rise to international migration. Social conflicts also impair

the socio-economic situation in many countries, driving people to find a safe and stable place to live and to flourish.

Five, family reunification: When migrants have favorable basic conditions for their family members, and they desire for reunification, another migration is likely to happen.

Six, environmental volatilities: Natural disasters and floods may force acute migration, but the soil pollution, water pollution and sea level rise should lead to permanent migration. This is possibly true in the current situation. With survival instincts, people tend to move to places with favorable natural conditions for their living. Thus, environment fluctuations are also considered key factors promoting international migration.

Seven, ethnic and cultural issues: When an ethnic and religious group with common values and identities are “torn apart” and live on adjacent lands of neighboring countries, the borders among common perceptions of these communities do not coincide with the borders among countries. These groups are often of minority within the social community. The interaction between them and the rest of the country may not be as much as it is towards their cross-border brothers of common ethnicity.

2. The situation of labor migration across the Chinese border in the study area

Researches on the historical and cultural exchange across the border between Vietnam and China show that the migration between the two countries is more or less related to the above causes. Within the article, we describe the situation of labor migration in the northern mountainous areas of Vietnam (case-studies in Ha Giang and Lang Son provinces) to China (a type

of international labor migration); thereby considering the differences and similarities in comparison with international migration in general.

Based on migration data of Northern mountainous provinces for over a span of 5 years from 2012 to 2017, there have been five specific types of migration: 1) Planned migration - resettlement migration (long-term migration) has been popular in regions with hydropower projects, large national works, industrial clusters, etc; 2) Free migration into the Central Highlands, Southeast, or surrounding provinces/districts (intended long-term migration) has been partially declined; 3) Labor migration to locations of companies and enterprises outside the province (temporary migration, seasonal migration); 4) Labor migration across the border with China has been an upsurge; and 5) Migration - labor export to some other countries (which accounts for a small rate).

The survey in the areas of Lang Son and Ha Giang¹ provinces shows that labor

migration across the Chinese border has been the dominant migration flow, predominating in both participants and acquired income level.

A common situation in rural China (including China provinces bordering Vietnam) is that many people go to big cities in search for high income, causing a big gap in the labor force (lack of labor in rural areas). This has attracted a large number of labors from Vietnam to participate in agricultural production. Namely, there has been no significant difference regarding the occupational nature of this migrant group after migration when the mode of production is still based on simple and manual labor (cutting sugarcane, planting bananas, cutting timber, clearing plants, etc). Some young people (from 18 to 30 years old) with secondary or higher education work for small companies in the border areas.

Migration reports reflected an absolutely large number of migrant workers from some Northern mountainous provinces to China; Some communes such as Pho Cao (Dong Van) had 795 employees working in China in 2017 (Pho Cao People's Committee, 2017).

According to Ha Giang statistics (see Table 1), within the area of only 4 communes of Dong Van and Hoang Su Phi districts, there have been at least 100 migrant workers to China in each commune. This was, however, just the documented number, while the actual number should have been much larger, because there had been many remote villagers coming back after working in China under limited government control.

¹ The survey was carried out in 2018. In Lang Son, 04 communes: Cao Minh commune and De Tham commune (Trang Dinh district, where ethnic minorities occupied 93%), Xuan Duong commune and Ai Quoc commune (Loc Binh district, where 94% was ethnic minorities). In Ha Giang, 04 communes: Then Chu Phin commune, Chien Pho commune (Hoang Su Phi district, where Nung, Dao, Mong people accounted for 73% of the population, the rest was 9 other ethnic groups), Pho Cao commune and Lung Phin commune (Dong Van district, where Mong people made up 89% of the population, the rest was 16 other ethnic groups). Initially collected information was mainly local statistics and in-depth interviews (IDI). A total number of in-depth interviews reached 50 people (25 people per province), including migrant workers and government officials at all levels (village, commune, district).

Table 1: Number of migrant workers in some communes in Ha Giang province
(Unit: person)

District	Dong Van		Hoang Su Phi	
Commune	Lung Phin	Pho Cao	Then Chu Phin	Chien Pho
Total	283	795	105	198
Female / Male ratio	25/258	226/569	42/63	23/175
Number without travel document	Uncontrolled	Uncontrolled	45/105	10/198

Source: Compiled from communes' reports on migration (Chien Pho People's Committee, 2018; Lung Phin People's Committee, 2018; Pho Cao People's Committee, 2018; Then Chu Phin People's Committee, 2018).

** The legality of migrant workers to China*
The provincial and district governments of the border provinces (both Vietnam and China) have signed the general agreement to recognize and issue laissez-passers to guarantee the safety of workers, avoiding losses caused by illegal travel. Local authorities in Ha Giang and Lang Son provinces have also developed communications for workers on guidelines and policies at the border, issues related to security and legal procedures to cross the border, so that people would have the best choice for working migration. However, the number of people applying for a travel document remains limited; partly due to the inconvenience of distance (it is a challenge to travel from remote villages to the province center, etc.), partly because people are hesitant to contact the authorities: *"Despite of the signed agreement to recognize and issue laissez-passers to guarantee the safety of workers, avoiding losses caused by illegal travel, the number of people applying for a travel document remains*

limited; partly due to the inconvenience of distance" (IDI with a police officer of Hoang Su Phi district); *"Migrant workers are seasonal migrants, the working period could be from one to two months, even a week or two; most migration is easily followed by the border trade"* (IDI with an official of De Tham commune).

Border communes manage cross-border labors at different levels. The statistics of illegal migrants to China is of the responsibility of commune authorities.

In Chien Pho and Then Chu Phin communes, the statistics number of free migrant workers to China was only a few, most of them had permits: *"Our secretary and village head perfectly control whether a migrant worker has a travel document or not, and remind him/her as well as his/her family about pursuing a working permit"* (IDI with an official of Chien Pho commune). Commune authorities mentioned very little about the obligation of getting a permit, which seems to promote a relatively large number of migrant workers to China. Table 1 shows that the number of migrant workers in of Lung Phin and Pho Cao communes (Dong Van district) substantially exceeds those in Then Chu Phin and Chien Pho communes (Hoang Su Phi district). *"Most migrant workers to China were seasonal migrants, 30-40% of which owned issued laissez-passers"* (IDI with an official of Dong Van district). *"The management of this migration group is not strict, due to favorable travel conditions between the two countries' borders, and the high frequency of commuting"* (IDI with an official of Pho Cao district).

A noteworthy feature is that employers in China prefer to hire unlicensed workers. *"Migrant workers to China do not want to*

apply for a travel document for two main reasons: Firstly, in order to apply for a travel document, people have to go to the district (which is too far from the commune center), therefore, they are hesitant to go; Secondly, Chinese employers do not want to hire workers with travel documents, because they have to be more responsible and involved in legally binding, thus, they tend to hire illegal migrant workers with cheap price and take no responsibility for them” (IDI with an official of the family register office in Pho Cao commune). This is explained that, employers will have less responsibility in case of dispute when hiring unlicensed workers. Those with a permit could ask for the Chinese government’s intervention when delinquency or rights-related problems occur. “We will have money if working for good employers, or no money in case of bad employers” (IDI with a 35-year-old man, De Tham commune).

In some cases, an employer may keep one third of an employee’s wage on the pretext that “the rest will be paid next time” (to keep his labors), then the employee should lose this amount of money if he does not go back to work for the employer. However, many people affirmed not to be in such situation: “There exists information about delinquency happening to migrant workers to China, but as far as we know, this is not the case because if so, then employers could not find a worker” (IDI with a village secretary, Chien Pho commune).

Employment connection among workers has occurred in some places, especially for first-time migrants. Brokers connect employers for workers to receive commissions from both sides: “My wife crossed the border to Guangxi province, China, mainly cutting sugarcane, peeling bark, and doing hard

work. In order to get this job, our family had to pay the broker with a service fee of 2 million VND” (IDI with a 40-year-old man, De Tham commune).

* Income

Most employees receive remuneration on a daily basis, ranging from 100-150 yuan per day, equivalent to 300-450 thousand dong per day.

The economic situation of migrant workers to China is often far better compared to before, and better than those who do not go to China. Many households after one to two years working in China could build houses: “The newly-built, big, and nice houses in Dong Van now have been afforded by income from migrant workers to China, some even bought cars” (IDI with an official of the Department of Ethnic Minority Affairs, Dong Van District). Poor households in the border areas could afford to renew and repair houses mainly thanks to the money coming from this type of labor migration.

There are cases in which remuneration for labor is calculated by year. In some families, both husband and wife went to China to contract a banana farm for planting, caring, and harvesting. Chinese owners often pay (convert) 100-110 million dong each year: “There are some households working on annual contracts, for example, they contract a banana farm, to get 100 million dong for the whole year” (IDI with a 45-year-year man, Chien Pho commune).

* Gender

According to statistics data from communes’ reports, the number of male migrant workers to China was higher than that of female. Typically, Lung Phin commune and Chien Pho commune had the ratio of 258 males to 25 females; and 175 males to 23 females,

respectively (see Table 1). According to our research, this is because, employers on the other side of the border are often in need of heavy manual workers which is more suitable for men; The disadvantages or potential disadvantages is less likely to occur to men than women.

3. Causes of labor migration across the Chinese border from the perspective of international migration

Until now, through the qualitative survey results, it could be temporarily affirmed that the biggest driving force of labor migration to China in the Northern mountainous region is economic reason. This is reflected in the following aspects:

- *Income differences* between the two border sides: Migrants to China often work in rural areas, but the earned income is nearly doubled the corresponding figure when they work in Vietnam. Manual labor in Vietnam earns only 120-150 thousand VND per day, while 100-150 yuan per day, equivalent to 300-450 thousand dong could be received in rural China. *“Both husband and wife working in agriculture could earn a total annual income of only approximately 15-20 million dong, compared to 10 million dong per month when working in the other side of the border. Therefore, we’ve got to go”* (IDI with a 45-year-old man, De Tham commune).
- *Opportunity related factors* such as better health care, professional working environment, more advanced education system, etc. These factors are not related to the labor migration to China. The driving force of labor migration at the border areas of Vietnam to China is to improve their lives. However, the demands of economic diversification, income maximization and risk minimization are rarely recognized

within ethnic minority communities in the Northern mountainous areas, especially among Mong people.

For Mong people, labor migration to get rich is unlikely their goal. According to the field survey, when a Hmong family lacked a certain item of their need (such as motorcycles, TVs, refrigerators, etc), they accepted to go across the border to earn just enough to buy that kind of item, then returned to normal production until a new demand appears: *“I had enough money to afford a motorcycle, then I stayed at home, no more travel”* (IDI with a 25-year-old man, Pho Cao commune).

There are cases where migrant workers were at risk or entangled in social evils, suffering the consequences rather than earning additional income. *“Migration to China is mainly to find jobs, but there were some young people becoming involved in games, gamble, alcohol and so on, they were unable to send money back to their families throughout the year. Even many cases of illegal immigration have been arrested, beaten, and all their money has been confiscated by the Chinese police”* (IDI with an official, De Tham commune).

- *Pulling and Pushing factors* towards migration: In our opinion, this is the attraction from the *disparity in human resources*. A part of Chinese rural residents go to work in big cities, resulting in a large gap in the labor force/labor shortage in rural areas, thus attracting a large number of labors from Vietnam to participate in agricultural production. The paradox here is not the disparity in human resources between agriculture and industry, but between agriculture and agriculture.

- *Ethnic and religious factors*: Ethnic and religious factors appear in this migration

flow but not as the main cause. Existing kinship and blood relationship at the border are both historical and present issues. Many border communities share common ethnicity (especially Mong people), language, cultural tradition, and borderless commuting. Therefore, marital and kinship relations keep continuing, while it takes time and effort for national legal constraints to be successfully implemented.

- *Marriage and family reunion* leading to migration: Marriage migration used to be a spread (from the ethnicity perspective). In our survey, there are some women in Ha Giang and Lang Son provinces crossing the border to get married in the following cases:
+ Some getting married with the desire of a better life, when their desire was not fulfilled, they left their husbands to go to Chinese cities to do business. In Then Chu Phin commune, there have been nearly 100 women crossing the border to get married since 2002.

+ Some women married Chinese men who already had a wife and a child. As the population policy of the Chinese government, the husbands were not permitted to have another child, pregnant women returned to Vietnam to give birth, the newborn children were then raised by their Vietnamese families when they went back to China. This is a challenge that the departure government needs to address over both short term and long term period.
+ Some married women who went to China to do business “were seduced” to stay and remarried Chinese husbands, either leaving their husbands at home, or bringing small children and leaving husbands behind. *“Women going to China for business were tempted to stay with Chinese husbands, either leaving behind their children and*

husbands, or bringing their children and leaving their husbands at home” (IDI with a commune official, Lung Phin commune). In Then Xu Phin commune, there have been 03 permanent migrant women leaving their husbands and children at home; 03 child migrant workers, who were under the legal age for marriage, getting married with Chinese men without holding a wedding party in Vietnam. *“Most Hmong migrant women go to China on their own without travel documents, therefore, it is difficult for local authorities to manage. There have been many migrant female workers being seduced and persuaded to become Chinese wives, or brought into the domestic areas to do other jobs. Many women and girls have been tricked into human trafficking. A typical example is a woman in Then Chu Phin commune, who had a husband and three children, going to China to work; then she was seduced to stay and get married, but after delivering a child for her new husband, she was immediately sent back to Vietnam. When returning home, her husband had married another wife, so she had to live in her mother’s house... There have been cases that families lost information of their migrated members”* (IDI with a communal police officer in charge of the village, Then Chu Phin commune).

+ A number of “women who were bored with their husbands migrated to get married”; or “too old” women to marry in Vietnam followed acquaintances to cross the border to get married.

In fact, there are some cases where both husband and wife went to work in China, because of the wife’s beauty, she was separated to a working area far from her husband by the employer, and they could see each other once a week. The wife was

sexually abused by the employer. When coming back home, such families were at a high risk of breakup.

Nowadays, the awareness of people in the Northern mountainous region has been increasingly improved, they are more conscious of the legality in marriage, race maintenance, and general provisions regarding marriage with foreigners. As a result, the inclination towards traditional/sentimental free marriage, which is somewhat illegal in the case of cross-border marriage, has gradually become limited.

Conclusions

The labor migration to China in the northern mountainous region is international migration. Traditional viewpoint, in which migration comes from the desire to leave the home country, conflicts and wars, is not applied for this migration group. They mainly do "seasonal migration" for economic reasons. There will be an upward trend of labor migration to China in this area because of income disparity as well as the increasingly open conditions of exchange and integration. Authorities at all levels should facilitate cross-border laissez-passers at commune and district levels so that people can easily access this important administrative procedure for their migration, ensuring the safety as well as the assets of migrant workers □

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