

No Burmese Returning: Economics Across Myanmar-Thailand Border

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Abstract

As Myanmar's national politics change from a military authoritarian regime toward civilian rule, this paper seeks to understand whether Burmese emigrants abroad are starting to return home. By placing the specific case study of net migration flows across the Myanmar-Thailand land border into a larger study of all of net migration flows across all other land borders around the globe, a comparison can be made as to the direction and the amount of these net migration flows. We argue that, regardless of the political situation, when surveying the top large-scale net migration flows of over 350,000 people, fairly simple economic indicators help us to predict that, *ceteris paribus*, the *direction* of any net migration flow will move from poorer to wealthier country. Material differences in wealth, however, do not help to predict the *amount* of that net migration flow. We conclude that because of prevailing magnitudes of material difference between Myanmar and Thailand, we see nothing that suggests that Burmese migrants have started to return home in any large numbers.

Keyword: Myanmar-Thailand border, Burmese migration, Myanmar, land border, migration, Burmese economy, Thai economy

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1. Introduction & Background

For the Myanmar-Thailand border, the direction of net migration flows has been going one way since at least the 1980s; whether these migrants have been economic immigrants or political refugees, year after year, more Burmese have been living in Thailand than Thais living in Myanmar (Srivarathonbul, 2010).¹ Yet, if we follow the news in Southeast Asia today, a new trend appears to be surfacing whereby everyone these days seems to be going to Myanmar. Over the past year, current and former heads of government such as Barak Obama, Tony Blair, Manmohan Singh, Shinzo Abe, and David Cameron, as well as European Commission President José Barroso have visited. In 2013, Myanmar had its first high-profile tech company visit by Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt of Google Inc. The nonprofit Institute of International Education facilitated nine American universities recently in sending representatives to Myanmar to inquire upon exchange opportunities for faculty and students in the future. Multilateral organizations and foreign government officials re-establishing diplomatic relations, also

have been streaming into Myanmar (Holliday, 2013; Baily & Dobbs, 2013, p.10). Accordingly, international weekly seat capacity for all airlines flying into Myanmar has doubled from around 40,000 a week in August 2012 to over 80,000 a week by January 2013 to meet the new demand (“Myanmar Poised”, 2013). All this activity represents a dramatic reversal from years past.

For decades, the Burmese government made it fairly difficult for foreigners to travel to, or do business in, Myanmar. And after the military regime failed to respect the outcome of elections in 1991, many foreigners eschewed Myanmar altogether. Traveling there risked the wrath of critics of the country’s ruling generals, particularly by those activists working for a regime change. These critics urged maximum isolation of the regime as a means of putting pressure on the generals to release political prisoners, negotiate with ethnic minorities, and hold free and fair elections. However, the regime launched radical changes in 2003 with its “road map to democracy” (Stubbs, 2004). In consequence, as the regime has delivered on allowing national elections in the last few years, outsiders are scrambling to get into

¹ On our use of “Myanmar” or “Burma”, see Dittmer (2008, p. 885); and Steinberg (2001, pp. xii-xiii), xii-xiii; cf. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin (2012, pp. 7-8). Additionally, “Burmese” simply means here someone born in Myanmar and is not meant to have a connotation of any particular ethnic group like “Bamar”, “Karen”, “Shan”, or others. Note that “net migration” means immigrants minus emigrants.

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Myanmar.² If foreigners are now flocking to get into Myanmar, what about the Burmese? Until very recently, Myanmar was not only a country many outsiders avoided, but one in which insiders were spilling out in great numbers and in particular into Thailand. Now that so many foreigners want to get into Burma, will this mean that the Burmese will feel less of an urgent need to get out? Could the direction of net migration across the Myanmar-Thailand border have reversed, or at the very least slowed down?

Myanmar remains an extremely poor country with few economic opportunities for local employment. For political reasons, but economic ones as well, the Burmese have been leaving Myanmar in large numbers for some time, particularly after the 1990 elections were not allowed to come to fruition.³ Using official estimates from the United Nations, the trend in Burmese citizens voting with their feet to live abroad saw a nearly 30 percent increase in the decade between 1990 and 2000 and a further increase above 55 percent over the

following decade (Table 1). If we include the verified caseload of 129,242 refugees and the estimated 2.5 million documented and undocumented migrant laborers in Thailand (Thailand Burma Consortium, 2013; “Thailand Extends Migrant”, 2013), the estimated 100,000 laborers and sex workers in Yunnan and the 50,000 officially documented Burmese migrants in China (“China Arrests Five”, 2013; “Forgotten Workforce”, 2012), the estimated 50,000-100,000 refugees in north eastern India (“India: Close the Gap”, 2009; “Upliftment of the Burmese”, 2011), and the approximately 200,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (“Burmese Refugees Face”, 2013; “Rohingya in Bangladesh”, 2013), then about 3 million Burmese emigrants live beyond the country’s borders. If this approximation of 3 million Burmese is correct, then it means that at least 9 percent of the working-age population of Myanmar lived on the other side of these territorial borders, with the vast majority of over 2.5 million in Thailand in particular (World Bank, 2010).⁴

² Of course, there is more to a liberal democracy than elections (see Rhoden 2015).

³ For a review of these events see Fink (2001) and Ferrara (2003).

⁴ The estimate for 2010 was 47,963,012 minus combined estimate of 2,950,000 migrants and refugees across land borders. The estimate for 2010 of 33,206,300 working population was aged 15 to 64 (International Labor Organization, 2010).

Table 1 Burmese Emigrants Abroad

Year	Total Emigration from Myanmar
1990	653,862
2000	849,089
2010	1,318,870

Note: Reported gross numbers.

Source: United Nations, Population Division (2012) Department of Economic and Social Affairs Trends in International Migration Stock.

Now that foreign investment is rising and significant moves toward political pluralism are in place, are the Burmese still leaving Myanmar at the same pace? If Aung San Suu Kyi were to gain high executive office, would her election stem the tide of Burmese from Myanmar? What will have to happen in Myanmar for the country to stop hemorrhaging its people? Though cases of Burmese refugees voluntarily repatriating clearly are on the rise, no concrete data exist yet. As for economic migrants in Thailand, there is no current indication that laborers are returning home (“Higher Wages”, 2013). Nor does this seem to be the case with Myanmar’s other land borders with China, India, and Bangladesh.⁵

The next part of this article will outline relevant works in migration studies which aim to understand the conditions under which people migrate across international borders to escape persecution or seek better economic prospects—that is, theories of causation in migration studies. After migration theory is reviewed against the context of the Thailand-Myanmar border area, the article will elucidate some macro factors before delving into the specific of the Thailand-Myanmar case.

⁵ This is especially true of approximate 200,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh, who the Burmese government will not let back into the country (“Rohingya in Bangladesh”, 2012).

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2. Theory

Some of the first causal theories on migration were articulated a little over a hundred years ago by the geographer and cartographer, E. G. Ravenstein (1889; 1885). Though he is disliked for various reasons within the academic klatch that studies migration—mainly because most of those who study migration come from disciplines which have not yet quite gotten over the directionless myopia effected by postmodernism—one may find his “neoclassical theory” still relevant today. This article veers toward an extension of this side of the migration literature. Ravenstein’s seven “laws of migration” can be summarized as follows: 1) Since place of birth, most of human population moves a short distance and hence are migrations of short distance; 2) There is a ripple effect in migration where industrial/commercial towns form the center; 3) Emigration is the numerical inverse of immigration; 4) For every current/wave of migration, there is a counter current, though not equal in size; 5) Long distant migrants tend to move to towns/cities over country/rural; 6) Townsmen migrate less on average than people from country; 7) Females migrate more than males. All of

these theories have been further developed and built upon by scholars like Chiswick (2014; 2009), Borjas (1989), Piore (1979), Sassen (1988), Massey et al. (2004; 1994; 1993), Taylor (1999), Stark (1991), Zolberg et al. (2001; 1989), and others. Most of these theories are referred to as “push-pull” theories, though it should be noted that many consider this term a pejorative for this side of the literature. Most interestingly here, though E. F. Kunz (1981; 1973) argues for a distinction between political migrants and economic migrants, his “kinetic models and forms of displacement” is still very much in the economic tradition, at least causally speaking, of Ravenstein.⁶

Another literature for causal factors emerged in the 1970s and 80s that borrowed much from dependency theory and world systems theory—this side of the literature called the “historical-structural” or “historical-institutional” approach. Aside from various Neo-Marxist borrows in this literature, some of the new causes of migration were linked to elements like “chain migration” (Price, 1963; Portes & Bach, 1985), “cultural capital” or “social capital” (Boyd, 1989), “beaten paths” (Stahl, 1993), “cumulative causation” (Massey, et

⁶ See also Petersen (1958). For a specific case of migration theory on Thailand, see Srivarathonbul (2010).

al., 2005), a “migration industry” (Harris, 1996), and the overall “privatization of migration” (King, 2002).

A newer theoretical approach to migration falls under the rubric of “transnational theory.” This approach focuses on “the growth of circular or temporary mobility, in which people migrate repeatedly between two or more places where they have economic, social or cultural linkages (Castles & Miller, 2009, p.30). The causal theories of transnationalism tend to move the discussion away from the structural accounts in the last paragraph toward, instead, research that is more voluntarist/agential; and these theories are often broken down into either transnationalism “from above,” as in states, multinational corporations, and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, and transnationalism “from below,” as in the immigrants themselves or their own grass-roots initiatives (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999, p.221). However, the causal factors that seem most prevalent go under the rather broad domains of sociocultural, political, and economic.

Ethnographic methods tend to prevail in transnational types of research, and for the part of the world that this article investigates, a transnational approach is one favored by the majority of anthropologists

who study, say, the Karen or Shan community along on the Thailand-Myanmar border. Though these are incredibly rich research projects in terms of empirical findings, they are largely descriptive and do not attempt to generalize beyond their immediate surroundings. Without a doubt, when needing secondary literature, these anthropologists will be incredibly helpful for those areas along the border that I shall not be able to visit myself; however, we agree with Guarnizo et al. (2003, p.1212) that much of this descriptive, anthropological work is accompanied by “mounting theoretical ambiguity and analytical confusion.” Thus, from a theoretical perspective of attempting to understand the factors that lead to migration, the real value of this particular article will be in attempting to discern a clearer hypothesis within the transnational approach—that is, not rejecting the transitions literature, but rather emphasizing economic factors are being most prominent, even when they occur within a contextually rich arena of social structural reality. In this sense, we shall argue that factors of material wealth do matter for the causation of migration, but only if one considers this causation as something that ontologically “real” beyond the normal positivistic and pattern-like “push-pull” theories of decades past (Losifides, 2011).

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Turning back to the case study at hand, how much of the migration flow out of Myanmar can we predict by referring to the magnitudes of the gaps in affluence between Myanmar and Thailand, Myanmar and China, and so on? By nearly any measure, whether it be rates of infant mortality, GDP per capita, educational opportunities, urbanization, or percentage of population employed in industry, Myanmar is less developed than any of its neighbors. Over the last quarter century, Myanmar has ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world. So long as Burmese economic development, measured as per capita GDP, lags behind that of Bangladesh, to say nothing of Thailand, will Burmese continue to flow out of Burma and into its neighbors? Are levels of social development, such as access to health care, more important than per capita incomes, or rates of employment? Does exposure to political instability and possible persecution trump these other factors? Can we begin to think about how to get a handle on these questions by raising our eyes from Burmese particularities to survey a number of similar cases of substantial net migration?

3. Macro Considerations

We focus here on the direction and magnitude of flow of migration over national land borders. Focusing our attention on these borders we find that the Myanmar-Thailand border is just one of 303 distinct, but not continuous, land borders between all countries on earth. This includes everything from the shortest land border of about 45 meters (depending on seasonal erosion) on Adam's Bridge which connects India to Sri Lanka, to the longest land border of 8,893 kilometers between Canada and the United States. The median border length between any two countries is 532 kilometers.⁷ How many people are moving back and forth across those 303 borders? We turn our attention to net annual migration figures.

To begin asking how well the direction of net migration flows can be predicted by differences in levels of affluence on opposed sides of national borders, we rely on national per capita income figures. Do percentage differences in nominal gross domestic product (GDP) per capita seem to accurately predict aggregate trends?

⁷ For ease of analysis, we ignore sea borders, a very large omission. Due to unique particularities, San Marino, Vatican City, and Andorra are excluded from the data set, while Hong Kong and Macau are considered as separate from China. Since the most current data are from 2010, Kosovo and South Somalia are also excluded.

We hypothesize that we can think of the percent difference between nominal GDP per capita on either side of an international border as a measure of the economic motivation that will induce people to move from the side where incomes are lower to that where they are higher. In very crude terms, we found support for this hypothesis. Levels of affluence, according to the nominal GDP per capita measure, predicted the direction of population movements, but only very loosely. When we examine all 303 cases of net migration flows across land borders, we find that in only two-thirds of the cases are migration flows in the direction we anticipated. In one third of the cases, net migration flows were toward, rather than away from, the poorer countries. This finding is surprising. It might be explained by the fact that the difference between GDP per capita was slight.⁸ However, many of these cases involve relatively small numbers of migrations.

When we turn to the most massive displacements of people in contemporary times from their home country into another country (a minimum net migration of 350,000 immigrants),⁹ all cases but one (Canada to USA) display the pattern that we expect: *any percentage difference in nominal GDP per capita greater than or equal to one percent is associated with a directional flow of people to the richer state*. These cases involving massive flows of people are of course more important for understanding patterns in international migration than cases where only thousands or even tens of thousands of people are moving across borders. Borders across which net migrations reach close to a million people or more may better reflect powerful underlying structural forces such as differences in levels of affluence on either side of the border. Such large patterns of migration are unlikely to change overnight.

⁸ For example, when nominal GDP per capita between two countries is slight, like less than six percent between Germany and Belgium, we should expect other factors to be more relevant to possibly predicting whether there are more Germans in Belgium or more Belgians in Germany. Logically, then, a very high percent difference, like between Myanmar and Thailand of 70 percent, should help us to predict better which *direction* the net migration flow is.

⁹ Despite simply the percent of a country's population that is abroad, the actual physical number of human bodies living on the opposite side of the border is also relevant, because it affects the actual capacity of social services, relief agencies, and other governmental and non-governmental organizations. We are most interested in these larger waves of net migration and a 350,000 person cut-off provides 26 cases for closer examination (Table 2).

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Table 2 Massive Net Migration Flows across Land Borders (2010)

Direction of Net Migration Flow	Difference in GDP per capita	Net Migration
Mexico to United States	79.1%	11,657,566*
Bangladesh to India	50.1%	3,164,504
Myanmar to Thailand	71.8%	2,629,242*
Afghanistan to Pakistan	54.4%	2,370,744
China (PR) to Hong Kong	84.5%	2,223,512
Afghanistan to Iran	95.9%	2,021,070
Indonesia to Malaysia	65.0%	1,316,857
Canada to United States	-4.6%	726,790
Azerbaijan to Russia	47.2%	724,607
Morocco to Spain	90.4%	706,018
Albania to Greece	84.3%	674,008*
Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire	49.7%	596,950*
Poland to Germany	69.4%	584,608
Italy to France	14.8%	554,582
Georgia to Russia	75.5%	552,789*
Kazakhstan to Russia	13.2%	551,160*
Bulgaria to Turkey	32.0%	533,142
Colombia to Venezuela	34.3%	529,333
Iraq to Jordan	25.0%	512,233
Eritrea to Sudan	66.4%	474,811*
Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia	66.0%	452,469*
Mozambique to South Africa	93.4%	440,700
Yemen to Saudi Arabia	89.3%	370,897
Togo to Ghana	62.5%	368,003
Nicaragua to Costa Rica	81.6%	357,021
Somalia to Kenya	25.7%	356,201

Notes: *Indicates net migration that is above 8% of total population in origin country. Net migration defined here as immigrants minus emigrants between any destination country and origin country connected by land border.

Source: World Bank (2013), CIA Factbook (2013) for nominal GDP per capita. UN Population Division (2012) for Net Migration. Spanish migrants adjusted for recent flows to Morocco ("Number of Spanish", 2013). Burmese migrant numbers adjusted to current estimates ("Refugee and IDP" 2013; "Thailand Extends", 2013).

Of these massive migrations, only in the case of migration flows from Canada to the United States, where differing levels of affluence are minor (and recent), does the percent difference in GDP per capita fail to move people in the direction predicted (Table 2). The case of Mexico to the United States currently stands out as the most extreme case, measured in terms of absolute numbers of people, of migration across any land border in the world in the 21st century.

A moment's reflection suggests that even if we believe that human migrations are largely driven by economic considerations, and further that GDP per capita offers a fair approximation of such conditions, we are likely to face a number of problems in relying on such crude measures. For example, there is the problem of differences between average national levels of wealth and the average in any specific region. Concretely, suppose that GDP per capita is higher in China than in Myanmar, but that provincial GDP per capita is higher in the Myanmar province of x than in the Chinese province of y . Suppose further that we were not so concerned about income or poverty levels as with employment rates (or, perhaps, the size of manufacturing sectors employing low-skilled labor) in the expectation that economic migrants would tend to go where jobs were to be found.

What these various examples make clear is that until we have a better specified theory concerning the relationship between wealth gaps and migration for all land borders across the globe, our choices of data inevitably are rather arbitrary. At this stage, we have not started any of the work that would be required to measure these sorts of factors systematically. However, by delving deeper into one of the cases above in Table 2, we might be able to see more clearly other factors that work with magnitudes of difference in wealth in affecting the direction of net migration flows. A specific, single case can allow us to parse out factors besides just nominal GDP per capita. Furthermore, a single case provides some direction as to where to look when thinking about the phenomenon of net migration flows over land borders. Which, case, then should we begin with?

In Table 2, the specific case of migrants from Myanmar to Thailand ranks within the top three of all 303 world land borders in terms of sheer magnitude of people living on the opposite side of a border. The Myanmar-Thailand net migration flow is important, not only because of its physical magnitude of over 3 million people, but also because it represents a net migration that is over eight percent of the original country of origin (in this case Myanmar).

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Though the Myanmar-Thailand border fits the macro-level pattern outlined above with a percent difference of nominal GDP per capita (over 70 percent) indicating the direction of net migration flow from Myanmar to Thailand, other case specific factors will stay hidden until we look more specifically into the case. In order to conceptualize beyond difference in nominal GDP per capita, the specific case of the Myanmar-Thailand border will be considered below.

3. The Myanmar-Thailand Border

The flow of Burmese migrants into Thailand has received its fair share of academic and journalistic research. The class of “economic” migrants has received as much attention as “political” refugees. The vast majority of these research projects have been specific case studies and often very rich in recording the hardships that the Burmese migrant community experience while in Thailand (Pearson & Kusakabe, 2012; 2010; Rhoden & Rhoden, 2011; Pollock & Aung, 2010; 2006; Arnold &

Hewison, 2005; Lang, 2002). What is less well understood is how this particular migration flow compares to other cases across the globe. Is the net migration of Burmese migrants into Thailand any different or very similar to other migration flows? Are the factors driving people from Myanmar to Thailand unique, or are they similar to those that drive other population movements around the world? Three other factors will be considered here of wages, type of industry, and age of working population.¹⁰ These three additional factors help to bring into focus specific factors to the Myanmar-Thailand border case beyond the simple percent difference in nominal GDP per capita between Myanmar and Thailand.

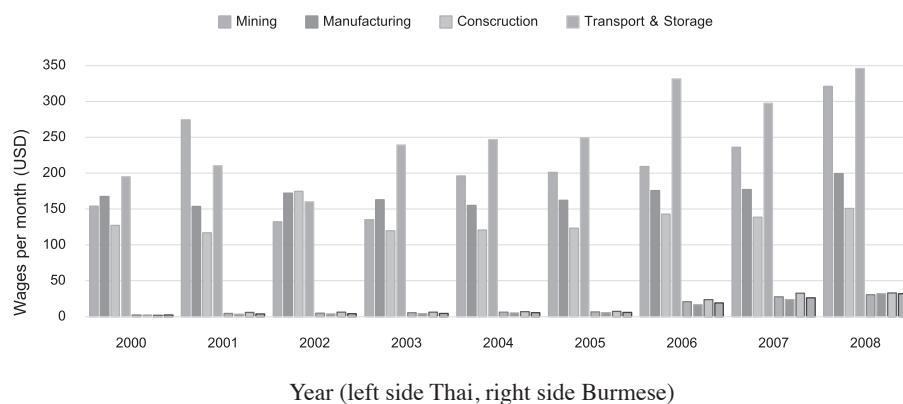
Considering comparable wages first, we see that wages on average in labor-intensive industries in Thailand between 2000 and 2010 were consistently on average over 25 times greater in Thailand than in Myanmar.¹¹ In labor-intensive industries mainly serviced by males like mining, some types of manufacturing, construction, and transport, a Burmese immigrant could easily be paid

¹⁰ Additional factors could be weighed here, but these essential (minimal) causal components that are normally reviewed in labor migration studies (cf. Anich, et al. 2014).

¹¹ A complete data set showing all industries and services cannot be shown here. Though this average, calculated over a ten year period, is provided by the ILO, all the data is self-reported by the Myanmar government and cannot be independently verified and should be used with caution. That wages are 25 times higher in Thailand than in Myanmar reflects an industry-wide average over a ten year period for the following four ILO industry groups: 1) mining and quarrying, 2) manufacturing, 3) construction, and 4) transport, storage and communication.

a fraction of what his Thai counterpart was during this period and still be making substantially more than if he had undertaken the same job in Myanmar, had such jobs existed. For example, using data from the International Labor Organization (ILO) for the middle 2005, an industry-wide average monthly salary for a labor-intensive job in mining would bring in \$7 USD a month. A similar job in Thailand would on average pay \$201 USD a month.¹² This vast disparity

in wages is similar for manufacturing, construction, and transport. Even with the growth in wages in Myanmar recently being reported to the ILO, the disparity between what the average Thai and Burmese male makes in these labor-intensive industries is stark (Figure 1). These raw numbers help to explain why it is that a Thai employer can get away with paying substantially less to a Burmese migrant to come work for them.



Note: *USD to THB & MMK spot rate average for February 2005. Does not count for inflation

Source: ILO

Figure 1 Thai vs Burmese Wages by Industry Sector*

¹² ILO wages for Thailand are reported in Thai Baht on a monthly basis and for Burmese wages in Burmese Kyat on an hourly basis. For this simple example, a February 2005 spot rate for conversion to USD of 39.5 THB per USD and 900 MMK per USD. Note that MMK rate reflect black-market rate for that time.

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Additionally, many Burmese women in Thailand are employed in the garment or other labor-intensive industries. Data on some low-skilled labor opportunities that are traditionally taken by women, however, are not readily available, such as house cleaning, laundry, cooking, or work in the sex industry. With the exception of the sex industry, however, average salaries for such employment normally is less than that for labor-intensive work in the formal sector, although domestic work may also include room and board for the young female¹³ taken in for such work. Not including room and board, a monthly wage as an immigrant domestic servant ranges from less than 25 to a little over 75 USD (p. 32). Sometimes there are opportunities for overtime pay, though this is rarer. In a 2004 study of Burmese immigrant women, the researchers found that 62 percent of workers earned less than 50 USD, while another 22 percent would expect a monthly wage of 50 to 75 USD. Only 15 percent made anything above 75 USD.¹⁴

Even for those Burmese women who work outside of Thai homes such as in one of the garment factories along the

Thailand-Myanmar border, the wages are not much higher than in informal work. Since work hours are consistently over 14 hours a day in both types of occupations, the only real difference is that the domestic servant normally does not have to rent a room outside of the house (Pearson & Kusakabe, 2012). Though wealthy Thais in Bangkok will tend to associate the role of house servant to Burmese women, the truth is that this type of work in the garment industry is now more prevalent than domestic work for Burmese migrant women. In Thailand's northern Tak province alone (which shares the longest provincial land border with Myanmar) the number of apparel factories offering work to immigrants has increased over 270 percent, from 40 factories in 2000 to over 150 factories in 2006 (p.49).

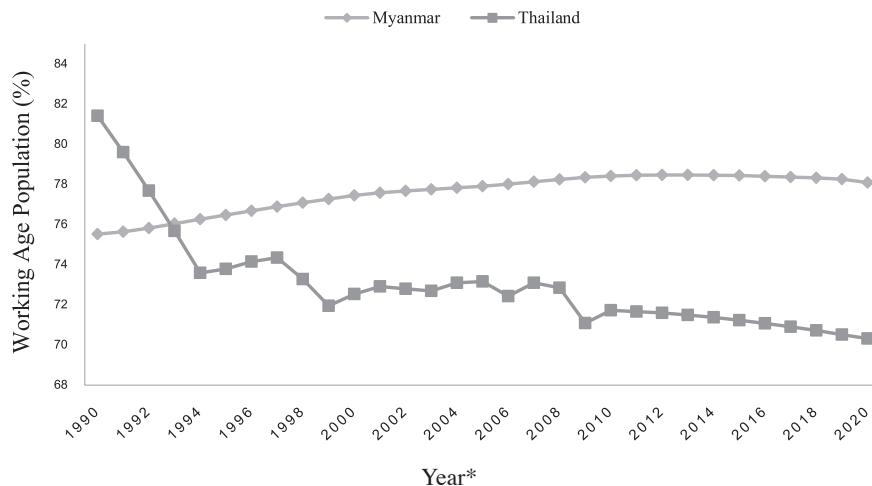
Little indicates that the net migration flow has lessened for men or women in recent years ("Higher Wages Will", 2013). In addition to the impact of substantial differences in income opportunities between people in Myanmar and Thailand affecting net migration flows, in Myanmar, unlike Thailand, the size of the working age

¹³ A survey of 528 domestic workers in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai found that over 60 percent of responders were between 13 to 24 years of age. See Awarsaya Panam et al. (2004, p.32).

¹⁴ Note the USD to THB spot rate of 39.5 in year 2005.

population is not expected to shrink any time soon. In Myanmar it is expected to stay nearly constant over the next decade, while in Thailand it is expected to drop (Figure 2).

This factor is likely to perpetuate the current situation along the Thailand-Myanmar border.



Note: *Estimate after year 2010. Working age population is between 15 to 65

Source: ILO

Figure 2 Percent of Population Eligible for Work

The inclusion of some of the specific industries in which Burmese migrants work in Thailand and the demographics of the working force of Both Myanmar and Thailand lend support to the argument that more than just economics shape the factors for why people emigrate across international borders.

This is always a complicated and dynamic process with many factors, so additional considerations like the above help to show in what ways the Myanmar-

Thailand border is different from those other 302 distinct, yet non-continuous, land borders across the globe. Though economics tells us about the overall direction of net migration flow, these other factors provide a clearer picture as to why the amount may vary case by case.

4. Concluding Remarks

Over the past half century and more, many countries in East and Southeast Asia have experienced rapid and sustained

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economic development. Economic growth has expanded employment, eventually swallowing up the bulk of the unemployed and underemployed and pushing up wages and reducing poverty. Visions of a similar dynamic becoming rooted in Myanmar help to account for much of the excitement about the political and policy changes there and the many prominent officials and business people jetting in to Myanmar from Asia, Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere. It is of course far too early to assume that Myanmar will in fact undergo a comparable dynamic of labor absorbing economic growth. And it is far from certain that the Burmese will achieve a stable political accommodation among the Burmese and the many important ethnic minorities in the country. For these reasons, it seems likely that Myanmar will continue to experience high levels of outmigration for some time to come, and, furthermore, that this migration will continue to be over the Myanmar-Thailand border. In addition to political cautiousness about the staying power of Myanmar's current political liberalization and democratization, as well as inadequate employment problems, Myanmar's labor force continues to expand while its neighbor to the east, Thailand, is unusual among middle income countries for its rapidly shifting demographic profiles that is bringing to an end the expansion of their labor forces.

We have abstracted away the great complexity of conditions that drive human populations across international land borders to focus on a few economic factors that may enable us to predict, all else equal, the movements of people across land borders. Our simple analysis suggests that the gap in incomes between Myanmar and its particular neighbor of Thailand, like the gap between Mexico and the United States, is likely to pull Burmese workers out of Myanmar for many years to come. The theoretical significance of this essay is that though percent differences in material wealth cannot help us to predict the *amount* of large-scale net migration across land borders, it does help us to predict the *direction* of that flow. This can be useful for policy makers as well in understanding overall contours of the probably direction of migration flows. Thus, as long as the disparity of wealth along either side of the Myanmar-Thai border continues to stay unchanged, we can say with a certain degree of confidence that, despite the evolving political situation in Myanmar, there will be more Burmese on the Thai side of the border than there will be Thais on the Burmese side of the border. The direction of net migration flow will not change anytime soon. It will take more than a return to civilian rule for the Burmese to come back home.

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