



## Migrant networks of irregular *Nayu* workers in Malaysia – The case of the Tom Yum restaurants in Kuala Lumpur

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### Abstract

The *Nayu* workers are unauthorised foreign workers from Thailand who may be found operating and serving at the many Thai *Halal* Tom Yum restaurants all over Malaysia. This paper examines how migrant networks form and develop among *Nayu* migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in Thailand and Malaysia using data from ethnographic fieldwork. It is shown that international migration has increased in current years and unauthorised *Nayu* worker flow has become more complex because of the role migrant networks play in shaping migration connections between Thailand and Malaysia. Since they go through their contacts without using a recruitment agency, these pioneering migrants constitute a very important source of information about the availability of job opportunities in Malaysia. Newly arrived migrants are also initially assisted and settled by the pioneer migrants. In conclusion, the findings contribute important insights into the connections between the labour demands of the Tom Yum restaurant business in Malaysia and the labour supply of *Nayu* workers in Thailand.

**Keywords:** international migration, irregular *Nayu* worker, migration networks, migrant workers, Tom Yum restaurants

### Background

International migration has been studied from various social science disciplines and interdisciplinary perspectives. Migration is a complex phenomenon and is itself a social process (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000). As a result an approach to migration is emerging that combines the macro, meso and micro levels and structures of migration. This network approach is interdisciplinary and is based on an analysis of the social relations and ties between individuals along the migration path. It also includes the historical aspects of migration between countries in a particular geographical region. However, studies of migration networks to date have not shed much light on irregular migrant workers and unauthorised migration. In particular studies have not focused on irregular migration between Southeast Asian countries. This limitation is regrettable because as Hugo (1988) argues networks play even a more essential role for undocumented migration.

Migrant networks facilitate, in particular, informal channels of migration and they provide the means to gain employment and to find accommodation. The costs and risks of movement for members of networks are lower because the experiences accumulated by earlier waves of migrants are available to newly arriving migrants (Gurak & Caces, 1992). Migrants who have access to migrant networks are therefore more likely to be safer and to adapt more easily to the new culture than those without networks. For these reasons, Hugo (1995) argues that migrant networks are a crucial part of migration to Malaysia. Klanarong (2003) also found that female Thai Muslims who migrate to work in Malaysia tend to utilise their networks of friends, relatives and family members rather than a private recruitment agency. However, there have been no studies examining how migrant networks begin and enlarge in the origin and destination areas.

A key focus of migrant network analysis is the connection between micro- and macro-level interactions (Granovetter, 1973; Goss & Lindquist, 1995). The purpose of this paper is to understand better the social and cultural factors shaping this particular type of migration of the Thai *Nayu* workers to Malaysia and the migrant networks that resulted from it.

## Research methodology

The study of migrant networks provides greater insight into why and how people move. This study uses a migrant network approach to study irregular *Nayu* migrant workers in Malaysia. *Nayu* means Malay in Malay dialect. *Nayu* is Malay Muslim ethnicity who is Malay dialect-speaking native and has been living in the lower Southern Thailand- Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla Province. This is the word that Malay dialect-speaking Muslims use to refer to themselves. Accordingly, it is the word that is used in this paper to refer to them.

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand social reality on its own terms, based on the understanding of people themselves and on observations of their interactions in natural settings (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Qualitative methods allowed the researcher to access the inner reality of human experience because they emphasise the importance of examining social phenomena from the point of view of participants. However, Fetterman (1998) and Berg (2004) recommend using a variety of methods to gather data because it encourages rigour.

Research methodologies each have their limitations, but by using a variety of methods, the negative effects of each can be minimised. Accordingly, this study obtained primary data via in-depth interviews but documents were also studied and direct observation conducted. It focuses mainly on *Nayu* migrant workers but also draws on a variety of other key informants, including employers. The snowballing interview technique was important because a large majority of the *Nayu* workers were working irregularly and, hence, are irregular. Given that there were no records on irregular migrant workers to be used as a sampling frame, snowball sampling was used. Snowballing would also help the researcher to uncover and effectively delineate the networks of which these workers are a part. The field interviews were conducted with sixty migrant workers.

## Findings and discussions

### *Irregular Nayu workers and Tom Yum restaurants in Malaysia*

Tom Yum spicy soup is one of the most popular Thai dishes. It has become well known among foreigners throughout the world, including people in Malaysia. Tom Yum soup is a popular Thai dish loved by many Malaysians, in particular by Malay Malaysians. Although there are some Malay and Indonesian chefs who were previously co-workers with *Nayu* migrant workers in Tom Yum restaurants, the food they prepare is believed to have a taste different to the food cooked by *Nayu* chefs. As a result, this position is usually reserved only for *Nayu* migrant workers and a few migrant workers from the other parts of Thailand because Tom Yum is considered Thai cuisine, and both customers and *Nayu* migrant workers firmly believe that a non-Thai chef can never produce the delicious taste of Thai dishes. Several irregular *Nayu* workers employed in these restaurants consider that the food prepared in these restaurants embodies the concept of Thai-ness.

Surprisingly, most *Nayu* workers have never eaten or cooked this spicy soup in their Thai homes as Tom Yum soup is Thai dish while *Nayu* people always eat local Malay food. However, the term “Tom Yum people,” which refers to the *Nayu* workers employed in Tom Yum restaurants in Malaysia, is well-known, wide-spread and accepted by *Nayu* workers themselves. Subsequently, young *Nayu* workers become the irregular foreign migrant workforce in the Tom Yum restaurants in Malaysia.

In addition, Tom Yum food in Malaysia is *Halal* (cooked according to Muslim food law) and is served to Malaysian Muslims, so the chefs have to be Muslims according to Muslim food law. Thus the cuisine of Tom Yum in Malaysia is considered a unique speciality of Muslims from

Thailand. Many Muslims from Thailand, both Thai-speaking Muslims from Songkhla and Pattalung, an *Nayu* people who are Malay dialect-speaking Muslims from Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, are able to find work in Malaysia in Tom Yum restaurants due to the idea that only Thais can prepare Tom Yum dishes, and only Muslims can cook *Halal* food because Tom Yum restaurant business is Thai *Halal* food in Muslim society.

#### *Migrant networks and irregular Nayu workers in Thailand*

Previous studies have found that there are networks of labour migrants and permanent migrants linking the southern border provinces of Thailand to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Migrants remain connected to their villages by returning to visit home while working in destination countries (Klanarong 2003, p209). However, previous studies are limited and do not help to understand how migrant networks operate among *Nayu* workers in particular among themselves and with the social relationship of migrant workers and other people within and between Thailand and Malaysia. As Gurak and Caces (1992) argue there are too few studies that describe empirically how migrant networks actually operate.

Tom Yum restaurants cannot exist without migrant networks. Migrant networks are based on social relationships within and between migrants in Thailand and Malaysia. The ties may be blood-ties and non-blood-ties. Blood-ties are the relationships between migrants who are close relatives and family members, such as parents, siblings (brothers and sisters), couple (husbands and wives), children and cousins (uncle aunt/in-law etc). In contrast, non-blood-ties generally include relationships between migrants who are not family members and relatives, such as friends, peers born in the same village, employers, customers and colleagues. The restaurants depend on both blood-ties and non-blood-ties.

#### a. Migrant networks and the family

Family membership is the strongest tie for migrant workers, stronger than any other ties. Family relationships involved in Malaysia typically include husband and wife ties, ties between elder brothers and younger brothers, elder sisters and younger sisters, elder brothers and younger sisters, elder sisters and younger brothers, and ties between uncles or aunts and nephews and nieces, between cousins, and between in-laws.

Established migrants will offer their family members help to migrate when they require a job and would like to migrate. Family members are the first to be asked to migrate when there is a job available. They are contacted by cell phone or face to face when migrants come home to their families. The new migrants enter into the migratory process with the assistance of the established migrant workers who are their kins. When the new migrants arrive, they are warmly welcomed by their family members and set up their own social ties among people in Malaysia as well.

These new migrants are not lonely as they have family members in their networks. Family assistance to new migrants is not limited to the same gender. For instance, a senior brother who has experience as a migrant worker could bring his younger sister to work in his or in another restaurant. The elder sister could bring her younger brothers to work for her or in another restaurant as well.

In addition, family ties in this sense not only refer to the members of a nuclear family but also to those of the extended family. Established migrant workers are expected to offer their help to other relatives, such as nephews, nieces and cousins. However, such help is offered only after they helped their own close family members. Help is then offered to other extended family members, after close family members have been offered and declined a vacant position. Moreover, relatives do not only live in the same village but also live in different locations, as they marry people outside their native village and may move there to live. Family members, hence, have ties with both husband's and wife's families and with their parental families who may live in different places.

Migrant workers, who work for their relatives, may like to move to work in other restaurants, although their relatives want them to stay. These employers trust their relative-workers more than other workers in the restaurants. They give their relative-workers a management role when they are absent, so they have to take more responsibilities but are paid the same rate as other workers. Some workers who migrate to work for relative-employers at first have limited opportunities to

move to other restaurants. They wish they could have more freedom to move within Malaysia like others in their networks, but they are not able to do so.

#### b. Migrant networks and friends

Migrant networks are not limited to family ties. There are other social ties that link people in migrant networks. Friendship, although weaker than family, is another relationship through which help can be offered to a non-migrant in Thailand. If migrant workers have a strong relationship with their friends, they will trust them and offer help to bring them across the border as migrant workers. Their friendship must be strong because migrant workers have to take responsibility for a new migrant who often works in the same restaurant or in a restaurant in the vicinity. Most *Nayu* migrants' friends come from the same small remote villages where they have grown up. They have grown up, played together in the same school and village and shared experiences since their childhood. They are nearly of the same age and are likely to have the same inclinations as they have been socializing in the same peer group for a long time.

When workers return to their villages on holiday, they have a chance to meet and drink with many people there, in particular with their friends. They share their work and life experiences in Malaysia with their friends, becoming a channel through which information about Malaysia passes to villages in Thailand. If friends want to migrate, the migrants organize work in a restaurant when there is a position available and offer their friends help to cross the border. *Nayu* workers have to take responsibility for their friends' life during the migratory process. If their friends, however, are not new migrants, they can deal with the migratory process themselves. Then, the established migrants just offer them the job and do not have to take so much responsibility for their friends.

After a non-migrant has agreed to take the job available at the Tom Yum restaurant, the existing migrant then provides information regarding crossing the border between Thailand and Malaysia. They advise their friends on how to obtain a passport. After their friends have prepared all the necessary documents for emigration, they return to Thailand and accompany them across the border. Newcomers learn many things from their migrant friends, including adaptation to the new life, training for the job, introductions to other network members, how to journey from and back home and how to make remittances. Previous *Nayu* workers also take care of the new migrants in the restaurants and have to take responsibility for them, which, of course, is not an easy job and without strong friendships, the migrants would never have offered such help to them. New migrants stay with and work together in the same place as their *Nayu* friends, so their social relationships are also strengthened in this way.

On reaching the Tom Yum restaurant, the new migrants gain much new knowledge through the *Nayu* network members in the restaurant. Network members warmly welcome them as friends and share their experiences during coffee breaks while working at the restaurant. This way, the newcomers can obtain reliable information regarding working conditions and the way of life in the new country. Moreover, the newcomers befriend colleagues and other co-ethnics, which enables them to extend and remain part of the same migrant network as the migrant friend who offered them work in the restaurant.

#### c. Migrant networks and the villages

When they have jobs in Malaysia, the migrant workers continue to maintain their social ties in Thailand partly because they come from the same village. They feel attached to one another as they have shared some experiences, such as community customs and activities, religious activities in the village mosque (*musjid*), socialising together and talking over a drink. *Nayu* workers from the same village or even province feel more like kin than others from outside their village. Although they have no blood-ties, there is a social tie connecting them as their houses are located in the same geographical area.

*Nayu* people in the villages know members of many households who have migrated to work in Malaysia either as workers or as entrepreneurs. If they have no social ties with family and friends, villagers might request their co-villagers for assistance to get a job in Malaysia. If an owner of a restaurant needs workers but nobody in their families can or would like to go, their relatives will contact other villagers who would like to work in Malaysia. If the workers are young and

unmarried, they contact their parents first, but if they are grown-up and married, they approach them directly. These social ties between villagers are based on mutual trust because they are not related. Young non-migrants who request help to get a job in Malaysia believe in and trust the restaurant owners' relatives who offer them a job because their parents are well acquainted with these owners and their families as well.

All *Nayu* entrepreneurs in Malaysia have families and relatives in Thailand. When they need workers in their restaurants, their families and relatives in the village will find a potential candidate who is unemployed. Their families and relatives select a person who meets the requirements, is trustworthy, easy to control and well-behaved. They do not directly invite the young potential workers but first inform their parents about the job prospect. After the parents are aware of the requirements, they inform the young potentials and let them decide whether to stay or go. The process of decision-making takes into consideration their security and living conditions in Malaysia. Their parents can be confident that their children's life in Malaysia will be all right because at least they know the entrepreneurs' families who come from the same village.

When newcomers have more experience and are linked with other *Nayu* migrants in networks, they have the ability to relocate to other restaurants in different places. When new migrants have worked for a while, they get to know their way better as their networks extend. They can move from their initial restaurant into a new one. Moreover, they become experienced workers themselves and can offer help to non-migrants in Thailand when there is a job available in their restaurant.

When workers leave one restaurant to work in another, they do not discard the ties with their colleagues in the old restaurant. If they do not have any problems with the entrepreneurs when they leave their job in the old restaurant, they normally continue to visit them. Sometimes when there is an urgent demand for labour in the former restaurant, these ex-workers will come back to work temporarily. Moreover, if the ex-workers who have moved do not like their new job, they will return to their old restaurant if they did not have any problems with the owners when they left.

The *Nayu* migrant villagers and entrepreneurs offer non-migrants help to cross the border to work. If non-migrants do not have any social ties in Malaysia, they cannot enter the migratory process. They would not know how to prepare documents needed to cross the border, how to travel from the border to Kuala Lumpur, how to get a job, how to evade immigration officials and police, and how to return home. But if they do have ties to migrant networks, everything will be arranged. Non-migrants can easily follow and learn from previous migrants. However, social relations between migrants and non-migrants are not easily developed. In order to be welcomed into the migratory process, relationships need to be created in the place they were born and grew-up in, and sustained for a long period of time.

#### *Migrant networks and irregular Nayu workers in Malaysia*

As most Tom Yum restaurants are small businesses, their recruitment is informal relying on networks of employees and/or employers. Contacts and information about opportunities in the labour market depend on personal social ties. Migrant workers have no access to employment opportunities through formal channels such as agencies, middlemen, or the Thai Office of Labour Affairs at the Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Migrant workers who seek to move to Malaysia or within Malaysia find employment through their network members, among friends, relatives, families, villagers and restaurant owners. The bigger the network in Malaysia, the more employment opportunities they are able to find.

When newcomers cross the border to work in Tom Yum restaurants, they make friends with their new colleagues, forming new social ties at the restaurant. Although some newcomers have known some colleagues who come from the same village, most newcomers do not know whom they are going to work with in Malaysia, for many *Nayu* workers come from different areas of Thailand's lower southern provinces. They normally get to know each other when they come to work together. At the beginning, there are weak ties between newcomers and the established migrants in the restaurant. After a period of working together, they become close friends because

they work and live together all the time, seven days per week thus strengthening formerly weak social ties although they are not relatives, friends or village peers.

Most *Nayu* workers do not work in one restaurant for a long period. They often transfer to another restaurant either in a different location far away or in the neighbourhood of the former restaurant. They leave their colleagues in terms of face to face communication, but they still maintain contact with them through a cell phone or by occasionally meeting over a drink on a day off at the friends' restaurants. When their colleagues want to move to other restaurants for higher pay or a better position, they ask them for help. Their more experienced colleague may find a new job for their colleague in their own restaurant, or they offer information regarding a job available in other restaurants they know. The movement of former colleagues around Malaysia expands the migrant networks to many large towns. Consequently, they can relatively easily find new work whenever and wherever they would like.

Tom Yum restaurant entrepreneurs consist of people who were born in Thailand and later become both Thai Muslim-Malaysian citizens and *Nayu*-Malaysian citizens. Some Tom Yum restaurant entrepreneurs are Malaysians and there are also irregular migrants who run Tom Yum restaurants in Malaysia. Some newcomers do not know their employers, in particular Malaysian entrepreneurs, before they come to their restaurants. New workers may have known *Nayu* entrepreneurs who were born in the lower southern provinces of Thailand, although they do not have a close relationship if they are not relatives because of the gap in status and age. These entrepreneurs spend most of their lives in Malaysia and return to their homeland just for short periods or for holidays. Employers and employees often first meet one another in Malaysia, unless the latter seek employment or the former look for labour when they visit home on holiday. *Nayu* entrepreneurs have to look after their employees when they have problems, such as being arrested by the police, family problems and health problems. These *Nayu* entrepreneurs do not think of their staff only as employees but rather as their kins as they frequently come from the same village. Malaysian entrepreneurs, on the other hand, have a different background than their workers, so *Nayu* workers do not usually feel close to them. *Nayu* workers are often thought of only as day labour and when they are in trouble Malaysian entrepreneurs do not offer them much help and may simply dismiss them.

Both *Nayu* and Malaysian entrepreneurs are also part of migrant networks. When entrepreneurs, in particular Malaysian entrepreneurs, need workers, they request their *Nayu* workers to help to recruit them. Malaysian entrepreneurs are not capable of recruiting *Nayu* workers themselves because they have limited contacts, so their *Nayu* workers take care of this task and find new workers for them. *Nayu* entrepreneurs, on the other hand, have a wider variety of choices as they have more social ties among *Nayu* workers in both Malaysia and Thailand.

#### a. Migrant networks in the workplace

Normally, depending on the restaurant's size there are three to fifteen migrant workers in a Tom Yum restaurant. These migrant workers may come from different villages in Thailand. Newcomers might know some of their colleagues if they are from the same village, but some colleagues have never met one another before working there. Most migrant workers remain working at the same restaurant for a while, gradually becoming part of migrant networks in Malaysia, but most migrant workers do not stay in one restaurant throughout their time in Malaysia. Workers who are part of the migrant network established in their restaurant move to other restaurants thus extending the migrant networks within Malaysia.

Migrant workers who have been working in their restaurants for quite a long time transfer to a new restaurant for several reasons. Firstly, they become bored with their work. Secondly, they would like to upgrade their positions and earn more money. Thirdly, workers change jobs if they have had some problems with their colleagues or employers which have made them unhappy.

Normally, migrant workers who are bored with their restaurants prefer to move to new restaurants after they have returned home for holidays during the *Hari Raya* period. They tell their bosses that they will not come back to work there after the holiday week. However, some migrant workers change restaurants at any time particularly if they have problems with their colleagues or employers, although almost all migrant workers continue to work in Tom Yum restaurants despite their change of jobs.

After quitting job, they often take a few days to find a new position. Leaving a job also means changing accommodation. They may have to live with their friends who help with accommodation and food while they are unemployed in Malaysia. However, most migrant workers do not want to rely on another person for too long. If they are unemployed for some time, they would move from person to person because they do not want to bother their friends by repeatedly asking for help.

#### b. Socialising with workmates

Migrant workers, particularly men, usually visit their friends in other restaurants in different places when they have a day off. This occurs once a month when they return for a couple of days to the border between Malaysia and Thailand to stamp their passports. Some restaurant owners close their businesses for a few days each quarter to allow their employees to have days off. During this holiday they normally sleep and rest in their accommodation all day and wake up in the evening to meet their friends over drinks at their friends' restaurants. Almost all migrant workers visit their friends together with their work colleagues. At first colleagues introduce them to their own friends at other restaurants. They get to know one another and thus new people are befriended through their work mates. This leads to the establishment of new social relationships, and these friends become part of their networks if they develop good rapport. They are likely to exchange their cell phone numbers at their first meeting and then maintain their social relationship through cell phone networks.

Similarly, Anja Rudnick (2009) found that Bangladeshi men working in Malaysia are likely to meet their friends in the public realm at local restaurants for coffee or tea. According to Pattana Kitiarsa (2006), Thai migrant workers in Singapore maintain their co-ethnic relationships during their days off by gathering in small groups to talk, drink and have fun at the "Golden Mile Complex", Thai labour's public space in Singapore. As Kitiarsa (2006, p15) explained, "The Golden Mile on the weekend resembles the festive atmosphere in Isan's rural villages. Mostly middle and advanced aged men gather together to have a meal and a drink over fun-making conversations in corners of the buildings or in the parking lots and footpaths, these are scenes which resemble household ceremonies or village festivals back in Thailand, especially those during the post-harvest time when villagers might find themselves with the luxury of time to celebrate and enjoy themselves after hard work in the fields."

Similarly, unlike *Nayu* women, *Nayu* men are more visible engaging in social activities in public places within their villages in Thailand and in their work places in Malaysia. As Lertit (1992, p41) says: "In Muslim villages in the southern border provinces you see men sitting in the tea or coffee shops or food shops, but one is less likely to see women except those who work in the shop."

## Conclusion

To conclude, all *Nayu* migrant workers enter Malaysia to work in Tom Yum restaurants through networks which grow by continuing to bring non-migrants into the Tom Yum restaurants and spread over through Malaysia. In addition, long term workers often become Tom Yum entrepreneurs, the main form of self-employment for *Nayu* immigrants, and these entrepreneurs create a strong demand for more *Nayu* workers to serve traditional *Halal* Thai cuisine in Malaysia. Over time, Tom Yum restaurants have drawn *Nayu* workers into the Malaysian labour market to prepare and sell the Thai cuisine associated with the workers' ethnic identity.

Migrant networks between the two countries shape and facilitate irregular migration. Without any recruitment agencies, the high volume of migrant workers increases further through their social ties as *Nayu* workers extend their migrant networks in the Malaysian labour market. Without migrant networks between the two countries, *Nayu* migrant workers from lower southern Thailand would not be able to cross the border, gain employment in Tom Yum restaurants and live in Malaysia. On the other hand, without the existence of migrant networks, Tom Yum entrepreneurs could not employ *Nayu* workers, as cheap labour, to meet the demand for labour in the Thai *Halal* food businesses in Malaysia.

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