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An Unheard Voice from the Thai Diaspora in Ranong

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Abstract:

The objectives of this study are to examine the conditions of the Thai diaspora in Ranong, the need for government assistance, and solution guidelines for policymakers. An in-depth interview was conducted to collect data from 17 key informants, including two Thai diaspora leaders, nine diasporas, two community leaders, two officials, and two academics. The data were analyzed using content analysis techniques. Thai diaspora faces difficulties in many dimensions of living, including education, employment, medical care, property holdings, and traveling outside the area. Corruption in government agencies is a major problem that prevents Thai diasporas from being considered Thai nationals and having a Thai identity card. Guidelines for policymakers to solve this problem are discussed in this paper. Corruption of civil servants and village headman is a major problem because Thai diasporas do not acquire Thai citizenship. The civil servants want these people to remain displaced, which makes it easier to extort money from them. Therefore, policymakers should focus on resolving such issues with human rights and good governance in mind, and decisive measures must be taken to deal with corrupt civil servants. The authors found that leadership is a very vital factor contributing to the success of social movements among the Thai diaspora. Poverty, deprivation and voicelessness of the displaced people are newly discovered variables that induce corruption among those with more power, especially civil servants and village headmen. Until now, the issue of issuing Thai nationality to such people has been delayed and has not received real attention from the government. In addition, the research methodology emphasizes the selection of key informants who are the first generation to claim their own rights, resulting in deeper issues such as human trafficking, which are still hidden under such problems.

Keywords: Thai diaspora, government assistance, unheard voice.

拉廊府泰国侨民闻所未闻的声音

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摘要：

本研究的目的是考察拉廊府泰国侨民的状况、政府援助的需求以及政策制定者的解决指南。通过深度访谈，收集了 17 名关键知情人的数据，其中包括 2 名泰国侨民领袖、9 名侨民、2 名社区领袖、2 名官员和 2 名学者。使用内容分析技术对数据进行分析。泰国侨民在教育、就业、医疗、财产持有、出境旅游等诸多方面面临生活困难。政府机构的腐败阻碍泰国侨民被视为泰国国民并拥有泰国身份证的一个主要问题。本文讨论了政策制定者解决这一问题的指导方针。公务员和村长的腐败是一个主要问题，因为泰国侨民没有获得泰国公民的身份。公务员希望这些人继续流离失所，这样就更容易向他们勒索钱财。因此，政策制定者应以人权和善治为重点，重点解决这些问题，并采取果断措施对付腐败公务员。作者发现，领导力是泰国侨民社会运动成功的一个非常重要的因素。流离失所者的贫困、剥夺和无声是新发现的导致权力较大者，特别是公务员和村长腐败的变量。到目前为止，泰国国籍的问题一直被拖延，并没有得到政府的真正重视。此外，研究方法强调选择关键知情人，他们是第一代主张自己权利的人，导致人口贩卖等更深层次的问题仍然隐藏在此类问题之下。

关键词：泰国侨民、政府援助、闻所未闻的声音。

1. Introduction

The Thai diaspora is a stateless Thai national emerged because of the new border between the Kingdom of Thailand and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, which was established more than 100 years ago. It is a group of people who have lived in the Myeik, Dawei and Tanaosri areas of Myanmar or parts of Koh Kong, Cambodia. There are approximately 50,000 Thai diaspora people in Thailand. The Ministry of Interior registered 18,309 people in six provinces, namely Ranong, Chumphon, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Phang Nga, Tak and Trat. More than 30,000 people have been displaced, missed, and reborn (Hnuthog, 2017). According to a report in 2022, the Department of Government has approved Thai citizenship for 70% of the target group (The Active, 2022).

Thais living in the land of Myeik, Dawei, Tanaosri are called Thai diaspora, which refers to Thais who live and cross from the lands of Myeik, Dawei and Tanaosri, which had been the territory of Thailand or Siam for a long time. However, this area belongs to Myanmar. Thongpam and Thairit (2018) explained that Western colonialism introduced the idea of a state-nation attached to territories with definite territories. This resulted in a change in the border of the state of Siam (Thailand), making this group of Thais/Siamese people become displaced persons living in neighboring lands. Currently, about three-quarters of the Thai diaspora move back into Thailand. Most Thais displaced from Tanaosri and Singkorn have migrated to live and are in the Thai diaspora in Muang, Bang Saphan Noi, Bang Saphan, and Thap Sakae District, Prachuap Khiri Khan province. Most Thai diaspora from Lang Chiya area migrated to live and are Thai diaspora in Tha Sae district, Chumphon province (some of them migrated to settle in Prachuap Khiri Khan province). The Thai diaspora from the Bok Pian area, mainly immigrants, and the Thai diaspora in Mueang and Kapoe districts, Ranong province. Finally, the Thai diaspora from

Maliwan and Koh Song have migrated and are Thai diaspora in Mueang and Kapoe District, Ranong Province (Kaewjullakarn & Samlee-On, 2016).

According to the law, there are four steps to applying for Thai citizenship: 1) submission of an application to prove to be a Thai diaspora, 2) verification of kinship chart and investigation of relevant witnesses, 3) consideration of the Board of Directors, and 4) the process of listing Thai nationality to the applicant in accordance with the specified regulations. However, after the 4-year period of promulgation of the law, approximately 4,820 Thai displaced persons have been certified under this law due to restrictions on the process of reinstatement of Thai nationality and the work of those involved. There were several reasons resulting in delays in granting Thai citizenship. These include the inability to obtain evidence to verify identity, bringing Myanmar nationals into the process of reinstating Thai citizenship, and having other groups of people who do not qualify under the Nationality Act No. 5 (Hnuthog, 2017). According to Kaewjullakarn and Samlee-On (Kaewjullakarn & Samlee-On, 2016), there were several limitations and obstacles, including the lack of unity in the identification documents, as noted by the qualified committee that the request and certification of the Thai diaspora submitted to the Department of Government was lacking clarity according to the definition of the Thai diaspora in Section 3 of the Nationality Act No. 5. As a result, the work of each officer is in a different direction at the discretion of each individual. Also, there are not enough administrative officers to perform their tasks, and finally, the government sees the issue of nationality as a matter of security.

Being a Thai diaspora limits access to resources and activities necessary for living. These included not being able to own a home, landowners, and owners of motorbikes and cars. They cannot travel across the province. As a result, young people cannot have higher education or pursue careers in the provinces because

they do not have a Thai id card. Consequently, they are required to be low-wage workers, or some do not have a job during waiting for citizenship, as well as not having political rights at all levels (Kaewjanlao & Wannachot, 2019). The study conducted by Maliton et al. (2017) found that there were violations of the human rights of stateless people and their families. These include exploitation of wages from employers, physical health problems, mental health problems, and being stigmatized by society as a group of people creates problems for the community. Yakron (2019) also stated that being stateless is the reason these groups of people lack rights and many other opportunities. It causes multiple problems in life, including working for a living. If the state does not have a policy to solve the problem of stateless people, it may become a group of people who create problems for society because of various pressures.

The Thai diaspora, themselves, have called for the government to solve some issues including the case of submitting an application to prove the identity of the Thai diaspora, the case of disposal of registration entries, the case of wrong group registration, the case of waiting for the record of registration, the addition of the name of the child according to the parents who have already acquired Thai nationality, and the addition of the name of the child born in Thailand of Thai Muslim descent (from Myeik) according to Section 7 bis, paragraph 2 and Article 23 (Nationality Act, 2012) caused delays and in many cases did not comply with the law. As a result, it affects the rights and access to state welfare for these people. Hence, this present research examines the consequences of being the Thai diaspora, their voice, and guidelines for policymakers in solving these issues.

2. Methods

2.1. Settings

In the west of Ranong, it has borders with Myanmar, including areas that in the past were lost by Thailand, namely Myeik and Tanaosri, which were divided instead of war to preserve independence during the colonial era. In 1411 B.E., the British colonists asked for the southwestern part of Siam, Myeik, and Dawei Tanaosri, to be given to the British, which in this separatist caused Siam to lose territory for a second time (Hnuthog, 2017). As a result, the Thais who originally lived on the side of the territory lost to the British had to be stranded in the territory ceded to England. Despite losing territory, the Thais living in Myeik, Dawei, and Tanaosri still preserve Thainess. The knowledge of culture and traditions has been inherited from their ancestors. They have the same religious traditions as Thai people, and local wisdom and southern Thai culture.

2.2. Key Informants

There were 17 key informants in this present study, which is in the range recommended by Hennink et al. (2017) indicating 16-24 key informants are suitable for key informant interviews. The key informants consisted of two leaders of the Thai diaspora, four elderly people who had lived in the area all their lives, five young people, two community leaders, two Ministry of Interior officials, and two academics. These key informants were selected for the project based on their knowledge, experience, and understanding of the problems of the Thai diaspora with the willingness to provide information to the research team. The Thai diaspora leaders were selected based on three criteria including (1) being a key person who plays an important role in amending the law (2) having been living in the area all his/her life, and (3) continuing to play a leading role. Nine Thai diasporas were selected based on three criteria including (1) having been living in the area all his/her life (2) experiencing difficulties in living as a displaced person, and (3) not obtaining Thai nationality. In addition, community leaders, officials, and academics were selected based on their experiences on diaspora issues for more than ten years and their familiarity with people in the communities.

The participants were informed of research purposes, the study's benefits, anonymity, their right to refuse and/or withdraw from participating in the in-depth interview, and the time frame for data collection. The data collection began with interviews with academics and leaders of the Thai diaspora group. After that, using snowball sampling techniques, the sampling method used when characteristics to be possessed by samples are rare and difficult to find was employed (Dudovskiy, 2022). Then, 17 participants were interviewed, and the results of the interviews indicated that the data was saturated.

2.3. Data Collection

The interviews took place in Ban Lang Community, Ngao Subdistrict, Mueang District, Ranong Province, Thailand. The in-depth interview for each participant took 45-60 minutes as recommended by some scholars (Gurkan & Kocak, 2020). A semi-structured interview, validated by three experts, was employed. The data collectors were trained on the related topics including the evaluation objectives, a review of data collection techniques, a thorough review of the data collection items and instruments, practice in the use of the instruments, and a discussion of ethical issues to protect the rights of the key informants (Rana et al, 2021). Therefore, informed consent was required from the participants by providing complete information about the research project so that the key informants can make independent decisions to participate in the project, and the researchers must maintain the confidentiality of the personal information of the participants. If participants feel uncomfortable with some questions, they have the

right not to answer those questions, including the right to withdraw from the research project at any time without notifying the researchers in advance (Barrow et al., 2022).

2.4. Data Analysis

Content analysis technique was employed to analyze the collected data. It is a method that uses the analysis of human documents and communications, which can be in various forms such as text, images, audio, or video (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). The process of data analysis includes (1) transcription of the recording or typing an interview speech from an audio recording to a word file to convert audio data into letters, (2) data encryption means searching for similar words or phrases spoken or interviewees, and then encrypting the data and categorizing the data according to the code, and (3) understanding the concept related to phenomena and related to research questions that can be analyzed with interpretation.

The main steps of the research process are summarized in Figure 1.

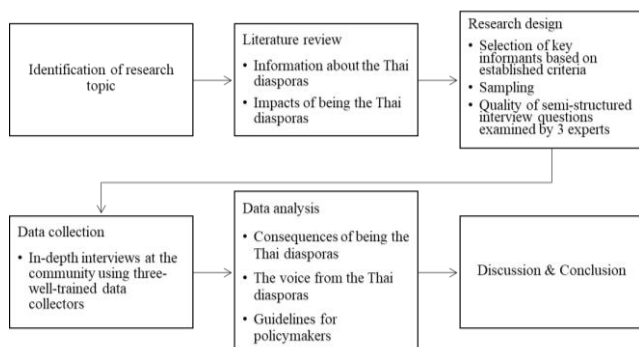


Figure 1. Steps of the research process

3. Results

3.1. Consequences of Being the Thai Diaspora

Approximately 2,000 people from the Thai diaspora are registered but have not received Thai citizenship or Thai ID cards. As a result, it has affected them in many areas, including education, employment, medical care, property ownership, and travel.

3.1.1. Impacts on Education

The Thai diaspora, who have a life of no comfort at all, struggles even to create opportunities for a better future in education to raise the status of their families like everyone else. They can study according to the education system in Thailand. Students can study normally according to their rights, from kindergarten to Ph. D., or according to the strength they can study. However, they do not have the right to work for government services or private companies because they do not have a Thai identity card. This makes their rights disappear. As a result, no matter how well the Thai diaspora study or the GPA is they will not be able to create job opportunities at all. Consequently, this group

of Thai diaspora people often loses the opportunity to find work. A 55-year-old participant cried out and notified her grievance as follows:

“My daughter wants to continue studying nursing after graduation. Although eligible to study, further study is not allowed to combine with work in a hospital. My daughter was in so much pain and regret, I did not know whom to turn to, but I endured the fate of life”.

Another key informant, a 48-year-old housewife, also reflected on the issue similarly. She said:

“I have worked hard to get my child to graduate school. After graduating, the child will have a future and will change their lives by not being insulted by the surrounding society or the Thai people who consider themselves non-Thai. Therefore, I am trying to give my children the opportunity to work for a company or serve as quality citizens in Thailand. However, my children cannot serve as civil servants simply because they are displaced individuals. This leads to the loss of opportunities, loss of income expected from work, and low self-esteem in one's own destiny.”

3.1.2. Impacts on Employment

Displaced people cannot work for private companies, bureaucracies or otherwise. Therefore, they are selling labor for money or fishing due to the limited occupation. These groups of people must create opportunities by fishing at sea, which will be the main occupation of men. Women also work producing sunfish, shrimp paste or mercenary. They are prohibited from leaving Ranong province if they want to find work. If they would like to find a job or leave Ranong province, they will need prior approval from the village headman or the sub-district headman. This causes difficulties migrating to find work or selling labor in other provinces. One of the key informants mentioned:

“I am skilled in working as a plasterer, can go to work in other provinces, and can use the skills that I have to work in mortar. However, to travel across the province to sell my own labor, I cannot go often because I must give the village headman and the sub-district headman to certify my presence, and make a notarized document, which is very embarrassing just because it is quite difficult to find the headman and the person to sign.”

This statement was consistent with the interview with a housewife whose husband works as a fisherman. She said:

“Having a career is hard. My husband went to the sea to fish and worked alone. I have to stay at home; I cannot go out of the area since I have no ID card. The police came and caught me due to no ID card.”

3.1.3. Impacts on Medical Care

The Thai diaspora has lost many opportunities, including education, work, job creation, and medical care. If he is in Ranong province, he can treat the illness according to his rights. Travel across provinces will

have the effect of not being eligible for free medical care, but only cash is required. A male participant said:

"I cannot travel to find work in other provinces just because I have health problems, I have to visit doctors frequently, causing me to lose job opportunities and lose income because if I travel to work selling labor in other provinces, all medical expenses must be paid by myself."

The Thai diaspora is also faced with poor medical care services simply because of their social status. A female participant cried out:

"When I became ill, I had to be admitted to the hospital, but since I did not have a 13-digit number, I was stigmatized as a Myanmar person. It causes me various difficulties. I need get help from the village headman to certify me, and the money must be paid to the headman. I have also been insulted, and they used bad words against me. Even if we do well, there is no value. One of my friends who were sick and had to go to the hospital for treatment was arrested by the police and charged with 40 thousand baht as extortion."

3.1.4. Impacts on Property Ownership

The Thai diaspora cannot buy or own assets such as cars, houses, land or buildings. If one wants to buy, he only needs to use someone else's name, such as a relative or acquaintance who is a Thai national with an ID card. This requires deep trust among them. In this case, there will be a problem of property fraud, when it is someone else's name, then claims or complaints are impossible for the Thai diaspora. The participants mentioned:

"The land I live in is my father's place, but he does not own it, it is under the name of a Thai relative who allowed us to live in since his parents' generation."

"Buying a car ... just a motorcycle is still difficult, there is no right, people who buy it must have an ID card."

"I must buy a car under my relative's name."

"I tried to buy a pickup truck, it was under someone else's name, he took the car because it was his name, I couldn't do anything to get it back."

3.1.5. Impacts on Traveling Inbound and Outbound

This group of displaced Thais is prohibited from leaving Ranong province if they want to find work. If they would like to find a job or leave Ranong province, they will need prior approval from the village headman or the sub-district headman. They said:

"It is hard to go anywhere, and it is hard to walk in the area on my own. If the police detect you, they can catch you..."

"...Also, I'm going to visit my younger brother who goes to work in Phang Nga and got sick, I need to be certified by the village headman to travel..."

"Sometimes people who go to work in other provinces must have a village headman certifying so they must go to the village headmen. Sometimes they

have difficulty signing the document if they did not get money from the diaspora."

3.2. The Thai Diaspora's Voice

According to in-depth interviews with 17 key informants, they want the government to take urgent action to address the livelihoods and welfare of the Thai diaspora as follows.

1. They would like to have a 13-digit ID card to be able to live a normal life as a Thai person in all respects.

2. They would like to be able to travel for work or occupation in a province other than Ranong without having to have the village headmen sign to always verify their identity because coordinating with them or the government agencies is quite difficult.

3. They would like the bureaucracy to allow the Thai diaspora to take the entrance exam for civil service.

4. They would like their medical treatment to be eligible for all provinces, not necessarily in the Ranong area.

5. They would like the Thai diaspora to be able to pursue various careers. It should not be limited to labor or fishermen.

3.3. Guidelines for Policymakers

The policy-making authority should take the problem of the Thai diaspora seriously. In particular, the management of relevant government agencies should be conducted based on good governance principles. Pushing for policies to punish government officials who exploit benefits from the Thai diaspora should be administered. This includes issuing Thai citizenship to these people so that they can enjoy various benefits in accordance with human rights principles as conducted by civilized countries. It is important to be vigilant in relation to human trafficking because displaced Thais can easily become victims of human trafficking. A working group must be established to specifically address such issues.

4. Discussion

The present research findings indicate that the Thai diaspora has been confronted with several difficulties. They can enter the educational system, but they cannot use the degree to apply for jobs. This forces them to have no choice of employment. They are forced to be laborers or fishermen. Consequently, they cannot earn enough money to support their families. Most importantly, the benefits that human beings deserve are lost. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Kaewjanlao & Wannachot, 2019; Maliton et al., 2017; Yakron, 2019). As they have no opportunity to get better employment, it forces them to certain jobs that are illegal and can cause violence in society. Corruption and bribery from the village headmen and police officers are also the problems causing the Thai diaspora

to face difficulties in living and unnecessarily lose their property, as mentioned by some participants. In addition, the Thai diaspora also faces medical care treatment issues. They are stigmatized as a Myanmar person and do not receive good service from hospital staff. Words that insult humanity are also used by healthcare staff. This finding supports the result of research conducted by Maliton et al. (2017). The Thai diaspora was also prone to fraud and bribery since they have no right to own their properties, such as land, cars, houses, and buildings. Hence, their voices should be listened to by civil servants, politicians, policymakers, and the government. How to make their unheard voice is still an issue that scholars should pay attention to push this group of people to get serious help.

5. Conclusion

Most Thai diaspora in Ranong migrated from the Maliwan, Koh Song, and Bok Pian areas of Myanmar. They are now living in Ranong without Thai nationality and an ID card. As a result, they have faced various problems in their lives. They can access the education system but cannot apply for a job either in government agencies or private companies. They also found difficulties in obtaining medical care services, property ownership and traveling outside Ranong. Hence, they voiced to the government in acquiring basic human rights. However, their voices are not powerful enough to require policymakers to take a serious consideration of this issue. To successfully solve such a problem, the state power mechanism structure must be revised through the national administration system to increase the power of the people to be able to participate in the administration of the national government, monitoring, controlling, and developing in accordance with the guidelines. This includes strengthening civil society spaces to become part of the mechanism of social mobility as an effective third power. In addition, local problems, both common and structural issues, should be solved along with social reform in the big picture. According to the findings, the implication of the research results should be given priority to employment issues because it is the most important issue that causes displaced Thai people to have no opportunity for employment. When there is no opportunity to earn income, there is no money to support the family. This group of people is more vulnerable to turn to crime, especially drug trafficking. In the short term, allowing the diasporas to access employment is very crucial for their lives. Furthermore, the implementation of rigorous punishment of corrupt civil servants will be another way to solve the problem of delays in the nationality verification process and the issuance of Thai nationality to displaced Thais. However, citizenship considerations should be examined if they are linked to human trafficking to prevent the use of their rights by criminal groups.

6. Limitations and Further Studies

This study did not consider the issue of human trafficking. The organized crime group tries to seek benefits by recruiting foreigners with Thai nationality and exploiting stateless people. In addition, the present study is also a specific study in Ranong province, while there are main areas of displaced Thai people located in 6 provinces that future studies should examine and explore solutions for this issue. This research is a study of a group of 17 key informants in Ranong province only. Therefore, the application of the research results to solve the problem of displaced Thai people in other regions or other contexts needs to be carefully used by considering the social context, culture, and social norms of each locality. In future research, attention should be paid to the sensitivity and vulnerability of the objects. Hence, an in-depth interview requires experienced interviewers who have good knowledge of local issues and contexts.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted with the consent of key informants. They were informed of research purposes, the study's benefits, anonymity, their right to refuse and/or withdraw from participating in the in-depth interview, and the time frame for data collection.

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Authors' Contributions

Waiphot Kulachai was responsible for the literature review, methodology and manuscript drafting. Junphen Wannarak was responsible for data analysis. Patipol Homyamyen and Suebsawad Vuttivoradit contributed to the data collection and conducting an in-depth interview. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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