

Media Portrayals of Changing Migration Patterns in Southeast Asia

การนำเสนอภาพของสื่อเกี่ยวกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงรูปแบบ การย้ายถิ่นในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

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Abstract

This study employed frame analysis to examine media reports of migrants and migration in Southeast Asia. Newspaper stories by Malaysia's *New Straits Times* and Thailand's *The Nation* in 2012-2015 were randomly selected and analyzed to ascertain how migration issues were conceptualized. Five news frames were identified in each country. A commonly applied frame in both countries concerned migrants as victims of mistreatment. Also, diplomacy and international cooperation on migration was another recurrent frame, especially concerning Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. Malaysian reports emphasized the country's cooperation with diplomatic efforts whereas Thai news coverage on international diplomacy presented its nation as more assertive and uncompromising.

Keywords: *Media, Frame analysis, Migration, Malaysia, Thailand*

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้ใช้ *การวิเคราะห์การกำหนดกรอบข่าว* เพื่อตรวจสอบการนำเสนอข่าวของสื่อในประเทศผู้ย้ายถิ่นและการย้ายถิ่นในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ โดยสุ่มตัวอย่างการรายงานข่าวจากหนังสือพิมพ์มาเลเซีย *นิว สเตรทไทมส์* และหนังสือพิมพ์ไทย *เดอะ เนชั่น* ที่นำเสนอระหว่างปี พ.ศ. 2555-2558 เพื่อวิเคราะห์ว่า สื่อมีการกำหนดกรอบความคิดออกสู่สาธารณะในประเทศในการย้ายถิ่นอย่างไร ผลการศึกษาพบว่า หนังสือพิมพ์ของทั้งสองประเทศ ต่างนำเสนอข่าวการย้ายถิ่นใน 5 กรอบข่าวหลัก โดยกรอบข่าวที่สื่อทั้งสองประเทศนำเสนอคล้ายคลึงกัน คือ การทารุณกรรมเหยื่อผู้ย้ายถิ่น และมีการนำเสนอซ้ำบ่อยครั้งในกรอบข่าวเกี่ยวกับการทูตและความร่วมมือระหว่างประเทศ โดยเฉพาะในประเทศข่าวเกี่ยวกับผู้อพยพชาวโรฮิงจาจากประเทศเมียนมา ทั้งนี้ การรายงานข่าวของหนังสือพิมพ์มาเลเซียเน้นย้ำเรื่องความพยายามของรัฐบาลต่อการให้ความร่วมมือทางการทูต ขณะที่หนังสือพิมพ์ไทยนำเสนอประเด็นการทูตระหว่างประเทศที่บ่งชี้ว่า รัฐบาลไทยมีท่าทีเด็ดขาดและไม่ประนีประนอม

คำสำคัญ: *สื่อ การวิเคราะห์การกำหนดกรอบข่าว การย้ายถิ่น มาเลเซีย ไทย*

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Introduction

Migration can be beneficial when migrant workers contribute to a nation's economic growth, but it can also become a problem when arriving workers are thought to supplant a domestic work force. For this reason, major migration movements are bound to produce stresses in destination countries that can lead to controversy and conflicts. Sometimes this even manifests itself in international frictions. Immigration became one of the top news stories of 2015 with huge flows of humanity from South Asia and the Middle East in to Europe. Wrenching reports of traumatized refugees fleeing hundreds of miles on foot was a daily feature of news in that year. To provide a perspective on such accounts, Entman (1993) offers framing theory that reveals "the power of a communication text" to shape the way people understand their world. How the public understands migration is determined in large measure by the way that the subject is framed in reports presented on television newscasts and in newspapers. This, in turn, affects public attitudes toward migration and ultimately shapes policy formation for migration and immigration.

Public policy in democratic mass societies is largely shaped by public perceptions of the importance of issues, and such perceptions stem mainly from media portrayals. Thus the way that issues and problems are presented in the media—in other words, how they are framed—can promote audience attitudes that lead to specific policy actions. Agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) describes the linkage between media content and public opinion. This study sought to identify the main ways that newspapers in Malaysia and Thailand

explained the enduring issues surrounding migration.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that in 2015, about one million migrants had crossed the Mediterranean, with half of the refugees coming from Syria and an additional 20% coming from Afghanistan and 7% from Iraq (UNHCR. The UN Refugee Agency & The International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2015). At the same time, immigration into the United States had become a "hot button" political issue and was intensely debated in the presidential campaign. Republican candidates verbally sparred over the best way to manage an influx of undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America. According to a Pew Research Center report, about 14% of the US population was born outside its borders and will soon rise to a proportion that exceeds the peak inward migration that occurred in the mid-19th Century ("Modern Immigration Wave," 2015).

But in Southeast Asia, another migration crisis has been taking place. In it, Rohingya—a Muslim minority in Myanmar were fleeing from persecution in their homeland. Many of these refugees traveled by sea to Malaysia and Thailand where they settled in makeshift camps. Many apparently died enroute while in the camps. Although eclipsed on the international stage by the migration flows elsewhere, these migrants posed a serious policy challenge in these two countries.

Migration in Southeast Asian nations has been examined from many angles, although seldom has the news coverage of migration issues been studied. However, this is a subject the authors have previously examined, most

recently looking at the framing of migration news during the period 1984 to 2009 (Magpanthong & McDaniel, 2011). That study found news frames mainly concerned migration streams formed by economic factors causing movements of labor within Southeast Asia. The emergence of a possible new pattern of refugee migration suggested the topic should be revisited. Therefore, the following study is the latest in a series that has examined news frames applied to migration in the main receiving countries of Malaysia and Thailand where hundreds of thousands of migrants have sought security and job opportunities.

Migration in Southeast Asia

Human migration follows a “push-pull” form of movement in which forces act to draw people across borders by presenting comparative advantages in locations. A “pull” can occur when sizeable economic inequalities exist within a region, setting up conditions for migration from less developed regions to more highly developed ones. Such movements of humanity have likely occurred throughout history as peoples have sought to better their lives. A “push” force arises when local conditions deteriorate sufficiently that residents are left with little choice but to relocate themselves. The worsening conditions may be due to many causes, but are often the result of social and political changes.

The countries of Southeast Asia have had a long history of inward migration from elsewhere in Asia arising as a consequence of colonial policies of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Millions of laborers from India and China were brought to the region, mainly to work in mining and rubber production in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Although the Chinese had settled in the Malayan Archipelago for centuries, in the mid-19th Century migration rose rapidly. Malaya became the leading source of tin, which was required for the rapidly growing canning industry and to provide labor for tin mines, and workers were drawn from China in large numbers (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). Similarly, labor for the production of rubber was imported from India beginning in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Migration to Malaysia today consists of laborers and domestic workers and their numbers were estimated to be about 200,000 in the first decade of the 21st century (Ramasamy, 2006).

In Thailand, inward migration was spurred by the transition from an agriculture based economy to one of import substitution industrialization beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present. This led to the growth in wages that became a “pull” factor luring migrant workers from neighboring states. Additionally, the growth in wealth enabled Thais to seek qualifications for highly skilled jobs with better pay, thus producing a shortage of workers for low-skilled labor (The Government Public Relations Department, 2015). Indeed, one analysis of the Thai economy and workforce found that after many decades of economic expansion, the private sector had underinvested in equipment and technology to support its growth, even though it created substantial inefficiencies in production (Economic Intelligence Center, 2015). These inefficiencies led to an even greater demand for low-skilled labor. According to that study, “migrants are mostly unskilled; their wages are low, often below the official minimum. Businesses therefore lack incentive to invest in new machinery to augment labor.” Consequently, as Ducanes

(2013) noted, “the labour shortage has directly manifested itself in the huge absorption of foreign workers, mainly from neighbouring countries”

Today, two general destination patterns have taken form—an archipelagic migration and a Mekong sub-regional migration. Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei were receiving countries for laborers from other countries in the archipelago, primarily Indonesia and the Philippines. A second stream of migrants involved workers originating within the Mekong River watershed. In this migration corridor, Thailand was the principal destination for workers from Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR (Susilo, 2003).

The Rohingya Crisis

Because this study was prompted by the emergence of a large flow of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, it is worthwhile to review their history. The Rohingya are a Muslim minority in Myanmar that speak a Bengali dialect. The root of their problem was British colonial authorities’ relocation of Muslim farmers from Bengal to the thinly populated Arakan state, now known as Rakhine. Although Rohingya Muslims were already living there, the increased presence of Islamic residents provoked conflict with local Buddhist residents. Zappei (2012) reports that an estimated 750,000 Rohingya currently reside in Rakhine state bordering Bangladesh, and there are possibly an additional million Rohingya living in exile outside Myanmar. Since Rakhine is predominantly Buddhist, in decades following the colonial era relocation tensions have mounted, rising at times to bloodshed. As things stand today, the Rohingya are stateless having never been granted citizenship in

Myanmar. Rather than a matter of identity and residence, Rohingya are treated as illegal immigrants, which makes resolution of the issue of citizenship difficult, if not impossible (“Thailand helpless,” 2015). Even Aung San Suu Kyi has refused to take up the Rohingya cause after the outbreak of violence in Rakhine State, on the grounds that it would be improper “to promote a particular cause without really looking at the sources of the problems” (“Help the Rohingyas,” 2012).

Rohingya fleeing Myanmar tended to prefer immigration to majority Islamic Malaysia as a more welcoming environment for Muslims. As in other mass migrations occurring in Europe and Latin America, smugglers offer their services to transport migrants to Thailand and Malaysia for a fee usually about \$1,000 per person (“Troubles continue,” 2012). However, after arrival, workers could typically earn only 30 ringgit (\$10) a day working, for example, in a local fish market. Although the huge financial investment in relocation would not seem to be justified for such wages, Abdul Rahim, a Rohingya in exile explained that “in Myanmar we can never sleep. Now we can sleep here” (“Troubles continue,” 2012). The push factor is far greater than one might suppose, as Yahya, another Rohingya exile, stated that some risk their lives for the longer boat ride to Australia because “they have no hope. If they die at sea, never mind. They may find a better life” (“Troubles continue,” 2012).

Framing Theory

This study was intended to shed light on the way that media in these two countries have projected perspectives on regional migration to their audiences. To do this, an

interpretive framing method was employed. Gamson (1989) explanation of framing is often cited by researchers. He described a frame as “a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue.” Entman (1993) further noted that,

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for item described.

Valkenburg, Semetko, and De Vreese (1999) researched how news frames affect readers’ thinking and recollection of facts, finding that the way a story is framed can make it more memorable and understandable. Sensational or adverse frames applied to stories seemed to gain higher attention and to be retained in memory longer by readers. Framing theory has been employed to examine a disparate array of topics such as political decision-making (Kuypers, 1997), support for war (Edy & Meirick, 2007), opposition to terrorism (Ryan, 2004), and public threats such as Tsunami and SARS (Luther & Xiang 2005; McDaniel, 2005).

Framing is often treated as an extension of agenda setting theory, which explains news reports’ ability to guide public thinking on a particular subject by its frequency and prominence in news reports (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997). Indeed, journalists rely on news frames as a way to report specific issues (Scheufele, 1999) and this, in turn, influences generally-held attitudes about those issues.

Based on these theoretical propositions, our project posed just one fundamental research question: How have leading newspapers in the

destination countries of Malaysia and Thailand framed reports of migrants and migration in the period 2012 to 2015? The answer to this question will provide an insight into the way public agendas and national policies on migrants and refugees might be influenced by news coverage.

Method

Stories for this study were drawn from the LexisNexis database on October 4, 2015 between January 1, 2012 and September 30, 2015. One leading English language newspaper was sampled in each country: *The Nation* in Thailand and the *New Straits Times* in Malaysia. The keyword search was “migration” along with “Thailand or Myanmar or Cambodia or Lao PRD” for *The Nation*. For the *New Straits Times*, it was “migration” and “Malaysia” or “Indonesia” or “Myanmar” or the “Philippines.”

Of the 414 articles identified, every 8th story was selected for in-depth analysis, retrieved from *The Nation*, and every 5th story was selected from 259 obtained from the *New Straits Times*. All articles were reviewed to ensure that each was specifically relevant to international migration. The articles included news reports, feature stories, and opinion pieces. By this means, a total of 100 articles were collected, made up of 50 each for Thailand and Malaysia.

Each story was carefully studied to determine the principal frame employed in its narrative. These frames were then thematically analyzed and sorted, creating a set of frames for each country that encompassed all stories surveyed. These frames then represented the key ways that journalists understood the topic of migration in their own nation.

Findings: Malaysia

Five primary frames emerged from the analysis. In total, 42 of the 50 stories analyzed fit within one of these themes. The remaining eight articles were ones in which migration was incidental to the main frame of the report or ones that were framed on an isolated topic. Of these five frames, three were not included in our previous studies on migration, possibly due to the emergence of new migration problems arising from push factors occurring in neighboring countries. The five frames are as follows:

1. The Rohingya refugee crisis. As expected, this frame was prominent in the stories about migration during 2015 when the influx of boat people from Myanmar reached its peak. None of the sampled stories dealt directly with the discovery of shallow graves discovered in sites near the camps inhabited by Rohingya refugees, although some of the stories referred obliquely to the “plight” of these migrants. Generally, the thrust of these accounts was to present possible solutions to the unexpected arrival of refugees. On solutions, the role of the international community was foregrounded, especially the US and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The causes of the crisis did not figure prominently in any report, and the solutions considered were about the disposition of refugees, not about addressing the “push factors” that drove them abroad. In fact, one story specifically identified human traffickers as the “cause” of the problem.

2. Inward labor migration from neighboring countries. This frame pertained to planned migrations, but also to illegal migration such as Indonesian laborers who arrived by sea to take up better paying jobs in Malaysia. Interestingly,

this frame had been identified in our previous study as well (Magpanthong & McDaniel, 2011). The underlying tone of most stories employing this frame was negative, and emphasized the putative destructive consequences of human movements. Specifically, some stories dealt with the economic harm caused by the use of imported labor, most commonly viewed as taking up jobs that could be done by local workers. Human trafficking was another important sub-theme in the sampled stories. One lengthy story concerned arrests made in what was claimed to be Southeast Asia’s largest human traffic syndicate. As a result of a backlash over problems associated with foreign domestic workers, Malaysia instituted rules that severely restricted their recruitment to the country. For upper middle income families, these maids and gardeners had been a common feature for decades, but the new regulations meant adapting to a changing reality. This frame emerged in stories about “living without maids” in which coping strategies for dealing with the lack of domestic help were shared.

3. Diplomacy and state to state relations on migration. It should be obvious that the flows of migrants from sending to receiving countries raise diplomatic issues due to the unplanned nature of most movements across borders. This was the source of persistent political conflicts between the governments of labor sending and job destination countries, as indicated by the finding of this frame in our previous study (Magpanthong & McDaniel, 2011). Several of the articles concerned Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak’s speech at the 48th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ meeting in 2015 in which he explicitly referred to migration issues. In that speech he lauded member states’

timely response to what he called “irregular” migration. Another story concerned missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH 370 and Australia’s sponsorship of the search for the aircraft in the Indian Ocean. This report linked expressions of gratefulness for assistance in the search to frictions over migration that had sprung up between the two countries. Other diplomatic venues were figured in reports as well, for example the UN Alliance of Civilizations and the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement.

4. Historical perspectives on migration. In the stories sampled, historical trends in migration were often used as an organizing motif. This was unexpected because it was not a feature of earlier studies on migration. On careful reading, it was found these stories were employed to explain things about existing conditions. One lengthy report on Muar, a historically important town on the coast of the state of Johore, referenced migrants from Java, China, and India, who were encouraged by the Sultan of Malacca to settle there. The story explained how these migrants leavened the population to create a rich multicultural environment. Another story concerned the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Malaysia and it linked the very large migration from China as a context for his visit. This story even equated the Chinese “bamboo networks” with Malaysia’s own economic and social development.

5. Brain drain and outward migration of skilled workers. Another frame applied to migration that had not been observed in previous studies was the problem posed by the loss of workers for the knowledge industries. Of course, migration of labor can occur in two directions, inflow and outflow. Malaysia has experienced both, with the inflow of low-

skilled labor from neighboring countries, as noted above, and outflow of educated, highly skilled workers to Singapore, Australia, Europe, and North America. This has been perceived as a problem by the government and within the Prime Minister’s Department, a “Returning Experts Programmed” was created to lure workers with high level skills back from abroad. One article reported that many hundreds of Malaysians had returned home under this scheme. Within these new articles and opinion pieces, there raged a debate over how best to stem the outflow—some suggested that pay differentials forced the most skillful to leave their homeland, but others stressed the importance of a comfortable social and cultural environment.

Findings: Thailand

There were also five themes identified in the Thai newspapers; one involving the Rohingya refugees had especially extensive coverage and contained three sub-frames. There were important similarities and contrasts with the frames employed in Malaysia.

1. The fate of Rohingya Refugees. There was a very thorough treatment of this frame, and perhaps partly because of this three sub-frames emerged in the news coverage reviewed. The reportage on this frame was as follows:

1.1 The root cause of Rohingya migration. These news stories contained information about the Rohingya, presented in explanation of their underprivileged status as a Muslim minority in Myanmar. Discussing the historical antecedents of their current situation, their migration to Myanmar was explained as a consequence of British colonial policies in the 19th century. One story by Naung (2012) stated

that “according to the existing law, residents who descended from races living in Myanmar before 1824 are regarded as citizens;” as a result, Rohingya have been forced to live under a stateless status with neither constitutional rights nor citizenships.

1.2 International law and cooperation.

The tragedy faced by Rohingya naturally called for preventative measures. This included how other nations—particularly the destination countries and countries of origins—were asked to stem the migration flow. For instance, in 2013, Thailand was accused with not handling Rohingya boat people appropriately. But Thailand was just a harbor on the way to Malaysia, Indonesia, or other Islamic states. Nevertheless, according to these news reports, often when Thai officials came upon these migrants, they were either sent back to their home country or, if they came by boat, sent back out to sea. One news story claimed that “experts are saying that had there been laws in place to deal with refugees like the Rohingya, Thailand would not be facing this problem . . .” (Olarte, 2013).

A half year later, another story reported that illegal migrants, including Rohingya boat people, were sent to jail where some lost their lives or were eventually deported. The story described that migrants who succeeded in entering Thailand could face abuse from traffickers. The story emphasized that more should be done to assist Rohingya boat people, suggesting that “with correct organization, fair documentation and supervision, and decent wages and working conditions, they can still play a significant role in developing the national economy” (“Give Rohingya,” 2013). In 2014, the UN’s General Assembly’s rights committee

urged the Myanmar government to grant citizenship to Rohingya minority (“UN calls,” 2014) even though that possibility seemed most unlikely in the existing circumstances. This report observed that should citizenship ever be granted, requirements might be imposed that would make this unpalatable, such as forcing Rohingya to accept a “Bengali” identity. By refusing to accept such an identity, migrants could face indefinite internment in refugee camps (“UN calls,” 2014).

1.3 Economic consequences of Rohingya migration.

According to one report, there was a misperception that arriving Rohingya migrants stole jobs from Thai nationals. The story asserted that these immigrants formed a vital part of the Thai economy arguing that “they do the dirty, backbreaking jobs Thais don’t want, and they are paid low wages. Many are exploited in conditions of virtual slavery. . . . Employers are delighted to exploit this cheap source of labour” (“Give Rohingya,” 2013).

2. Abuse of foreign migrants. Abuse was a major issue that emerged in our previous study (Magpanthong & McDaniel, 2011), and it seems likely to be a feature that will persist until Thailand and migrants’ countries of origin take action. According to Sripong (2015), maltreatment in the fishing industry arose almost 10 years ago, but it came to the public’s attention “only after the US [State Department] downgraded Thailand in its annual Trafficking in Persons report.” The story also noted that the European Union had sent a warning to Thailand’s fishery industry that mainly employed laborers from Myanmar and Lao PRD for mistreatment of its workers (Sripong, 2015). In another story, Meepien (2012) explained that poverty was the main “push factor” forcing

migration from neighboring states into Thailand. Even though seeking a better life, migrants remained impoverished because their earnings were well below the national minimum wage. They consequently could not afford schooling for their children, even though all migrant children, whether legal residents or not, were entitled to a public education. In the end, due to their lack of education and proper documentation, their children faced even worse prospects—child labor, trafficking, physical abuse, and exploitation.

The Thai newspaper *The Nation* also reported on abysmal working conditions in neighboring countries. For instance, in 2013, the news paper published a piece about Myanmar domestic workers in Singapore, a number of whom had fled to shelters to escape employers' mistreatment. An estimated 27,000 Myanmar maids were said to be employed in Singapore, and it was noted that Myanmar maids were preferred because their salaries were only \$300 to \$400 a month, far less than domestic workers from Malaysia or Indonesia ("Myanmar maids," 2013). In 2014, maltreatment by foreign employers prompted the Myanmar government to enact a law barring its citizens from accepting jobs as domestic workers in Singapore and elsewhere. Based on this prohibition, the Labor ministry suspended permits for women who intended to work abroad as maids ("Work permit," 2014).

3. Human trafficking. On human trafficking, news coverage presented two aspects of the problem. The first sub-theme concerned those who were victims of human smuggling. Mainly, according to these news reports, migrants were often deceived about the positions for which they were recruited and forced into jobs against

their will. For instance, in 2014 a story described how Myanmar men were forcibly sent to fishing boats and factories in Thailand and Indonesia (Human trafficking, 2014).

The second sub-theme involved migrants who hired agents to transport them to jobs abroad. News coverage indicated that even with payment of substantial fees, there was no assurance that migrants would arrive at their destination safely. In 2015, stories reported on the collusion of Thai officials in human trafficking and on bodies of migrants that were found buried near trafficking campsites ("Justice system," 2015). Included among these stories were accounts of the movement of sex workers through trafficking networks, some of whom were opposed their treatment as victims and to restrictions on their movement across borders. One Myanmar sex worker in Thailand complained that "before I was arrested I was working happily, had no debt, and was free to move around the city. . . . Now I'm in debt, I'm scared most of the time, and it's not safe to move around. How can they call this 'help'?" (Bhumiprabhas, 2012).

Frequently, cross-border smuggling of migrants triggers responses from organizations such as the International Organization of Migration, the Red Cross, the UNHCR as well as the governments of countries involved. During the period covered by this study, tensions were ratcheted up by problems of human trafficking. One report on this issue quoted Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, "we engage governments on respect for international humanitarian law. If humanitarian law is respected, there is no reason for people to migrate" ("A Lifeline," 2015).

4. International law and cooperation.

Thailand's history of responses to human trafficking and illegal migration has been unaggressive and tolerant. National policies have been mainly directed at projecting an image of a caring and humanitarian society. For instance, in 2005, to mitigate child labor, abuse of children, and juvenile exploitation, the government implemented education for all policy that permitted undocumented children of illegal migrants to enroll in public schools (Meepien, 2012).

However, under the military junta of 2015, Thailand made clear that Thailand would no longer assume responsibility for care of refugees and would not provide additional shelters for undocumented migrants. A news story on this shift in position described a request from the UNHCR seeking cooperation in multinational efforts to reduce human trafficking and to better address sea safety in the face of the Rohingya migration crisis. Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha responded that "Thailand's policy was to ensure that illegal migrants were safely repatriated, as it [Thailand] could not accommodate people who entered the country illegally. . . . The government had no plans to build new holding centres for illegal migrants" ("Govt surveying," 2015). However, Panitan Waiwatayakorn, Thailand's top government adviser on security issues, warned that if Thailand did not cooperate with international anti-trafficking efforts, the nation's image might be negatively affected ("Govtsurveying," 2015). Another report concerning responses to international condemnation quoted the Commander of Thailand's Southern Army Region who complained that pressures from western countries were unfair because "they

were themselves reluctant to permanently house these migrants" ("Boats with migrants," 2015).

5. Economy and job opportunities.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—an organization comprised of ten countries—put forward a plan termed the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). This project aimed to integrate economies regionally such that citizens of member states could move freely across borders for employment. This was planned to begin in 2015. News reports leading up to the inauguration of AEC speculated on probable changes in policies and on potential movements of migrants into the more developed ASEAN states such as Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia. Thailand's adoption of a minimum daily wage of 300 baht—nearly twice the previous minimum—inspired news reports suggesting the increase would encourage a flood of migrant laborers from Lao PRD, Cambodia, and Myanmar. The reports even voiced concerns that these migrants would bring diseases and other health problems to receiving nations ("Open market," 2013; Zweynert, 2014).

Discussion and Conclusions

Southeast Asia sits at the crossroads of global migrations. For millennia, sea travelers from the West had to negotiate the narrow Strait of Malacca, passing by territory that is now Malaysia and Thailand. Similarly, East Asians traveling westward had to navigate through the same passage. Over time, some of these travelers settled along the way, and this pattern of human movement has ensured these countries have retained a culturally mixed population. For this reason, migration is a

matter of enduring interest and concern in the region.

This research asked how leading newspapers in the destination countries of Malaysia and Thailand had framed reports of migrants and migration in the period 2012 to 2015. We found that in both countries, the frame applied to migration often concerned migrants' ill-treatment, and yet there were important differences. For Thailand, one focus concerned issues in the fishing industry, which had come under international scrutiny as the numbers of these migrant workers had apparently risen because they demanded less pay and tolerated ill treatment in order to maintain their jobs. And so Thai media presented this issue framed as "abuse of foreign migrants" due to threats from the EU community to stop importing Thai fish products. On the other hand, the Malaysian newspaper framed abuse around human trafficking and the abuses of smugglers as "diplomacy and state to state relations on migration" issues because the Malaysian government was not under international pressure. Thus it seems clear that this shared concern about maltreatment of migrant labor was more prominent in Thai newspaper coverage. Indeed, on the whole, reportage on victimization of migrants in the Thai newspaper was sharper and more emphatic than the Malaysian daily. This distinction identified how media primed what seemed to be important for their own readers and for government's policy consideration.

Both inward and outward migration frames were applied in Malaysian newspapers, but Thai news coverage only reported on inward migration. Thai news reports emphasized threats posed by incoming migrants, including for

example the loss of jobs for local workers. Worry about outmigration of highly skilled workers in Malaysian news coverage was a subject that emerged just in this latest study. Why this concern surfaced at this time is worth further investigation. For several years, the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has been embroiled in a series of scandals that have severely tarnished the government's image. In the ensuing furor, the Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, who decried the "collapse of democratic institutions in the country" was dismissed from the cabinet (Parameswaran, 2016). Such conditions of social and political turmoil are one of the possible factors that spurred migration out of Malaysia of highly educated individuals with marketable skills.

The role of diplomacy and international organizations played prominently in news from both nations. Once again, however, there were important distinctions. Malaysian coverage of diplomatic initiatives was reserved and dispassionate, especially stressing Malaysia's role in international forums. In Thai news coverage of international diplomacy on migration, Thailand was presented as more assertive and uncompromising. Stories underlined the military government's position that additional refugees would not be accepted but would be turned back on arrival.

And so there were both similarities and distinctions in the frames applied in the two newspapers sampled in this study, especially concerning the sensitive subject of Rohingya. For example, in the stories sampled, only the Thai newspaper made reference to graves that were found in the Rohingya's camps. Both newspapers however seemed cautious about

assessing blame to the government in Myanmar. In fact, the Malaysian coverage of Rohingya migrants seemed to carefully avoid even an explanation of the historical roots of the long-running conflict, something that Thai coverage tended to stress. Reports gave the impression of journalists trying to walk a narrow line between finding fault with Myanmar's actions and indicating sympathy for the plight of migrants.

On the matter of setting public agendas and national policies on migrants and refugees, it appeared the Malaysian daily ignored "push factors" propelling migration, such as high unemployment rates, political instability, and substandard quality of life in sending countries. At the same time, that paper seemed to be much more conscious of Malaysians' quality of life, for example in foregrounding the declining availability of domestic workers. In contrast, the Thai newspaper encouraged its readers to reconsider whether more should be done to help incoming migrants and presented the government and its officials as failing to resolve ongoing migration problems. Even so, its coverage highlighted Thailand's resistance to accept a continuous flow of migrants when other countries were unwilling to accept responsibility for receiving their share of refugees.

In labor receiving countries such as the two in our study, migration often tends to be pictured as threatening the welfare of local residents by displacing them from jobs. This is presumed to occur because migrants are willing to work for reduced wages, and this was a sub-theme running throughout news coverage in both nations. However, research generally shows that immigrants do not displace domestic

workers and may actually cause an overall rise in wages (Hotchkiss, Quispe-Agnoli, & Rios-Avila, 2015). Results of our study suggest that newspaper coverage tends to reinforce this false notion and perpetuates policies that allow officials to turn away migrants, even when doing so means loss of life. It is suggested that news coverage should present a more complete and accurate presentation on the consequences of migration.

To understand why news coverage has so far not tended to impact migration policies, one should consider priming theory. This theory explains that in processing information, individuals attempt to fit new facts with preconceptions and those pre-existing beliefs acts as reference points for decision making (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The faulty preconceptions about migrants cause readers (and possibly journalists) to overlook alternative explanations about consequences of migrations.

Interestingly, not long ago, Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad advanced "*Wawasan 2020*" —the idea that his nation should achieve developed status by the year 2020. The idea captivated the imagination of his countrymen and strengthened a national resolve to build Malaysia's economy. In Thailand, successive governments have adopted equally aggressive development initiatives. The irony is that advancing the wealth of both nations will only promote a greater inward flow of migrants across their borders. The reality of course is that migration will inevitably occur whenever workers believe that another country can provide better living conditions and job opportunities. How those migrants will be received will surely be determined in part by the news media frames applied to them.

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