

Chapter 10 The Labor Market and International Migration in Thailand

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<Abstract>

The Thai economy maintained steady growth until the late 1990s, with particularly remarkable growth being observed from the mid-1980s. Rapid growth in the manufacturing sector, propelled by foreign direct investments from Europe, the United States, Japan and Asian NIEs, contributed to this exceptional performance. The Thai labor market began to undergo a structural change from “excess” to “shortage” during this period of high economic growth.

Migration of Thai workers to foreign destinations commenced in the 1970s. The number of migrating workers increased rapidly between the latter half of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, with the increase in labor demand in the Middle Eastern oil-producing countries. The destination of Thai workers has shifted from the Middle East to Asian countries since the beginning of the 1990s. According to the Ministry of Labor

and Social Welfare, the number of Thai workers living outside the country is estimated to be over 0.4 million today.

Although Thailand had previously been regarded as a labor-exporting country, an influx of legal and illegal workers from neighboring countries occurred in the 1990s, when a nationwide labor shortage occurred. By the mid-1990s, Thailand became a net labor-importing country, with the number of foreign workers in the country exceeding 0.5 million. It might be said that the Thai economy is at a “turning point in international labor migration”, at which the country is transforming from a labor-exporting to a labor-importing country.

However, the structural change of the labor market was interrupted by the economic crisis and the severe decline of the economy since mid-1997. Facing an increasing unemployment problem, the Thai government introduced a policy to promote overseas employment for Thai workers, while restricting the influx of foreign workers from neighboring countries.

Nevertheless, one may anticipate that Thailand’s economic development will continue in the long run and that an economy with a labor shortage will become a reality in the near future. The flow of foreign workers from neighboring countries is likely to increase in the future. The experience of developed countries suggests that the number of people leaving the country for employment will decrease when employment opportunities increase at home as a consequence of economic development. However, considering the rapid advance of interdependence among Asian countries, the fact that information concerning overseas employment opportunities and foreign wage levels has increased, and that human networks have been formed through personal experiences of overseas employment, the number of Thai laborers working overseas may not decrease to any significant extent following an increase in employment opportunities at home.

<要 約>

タイはこれまで順調な経済成長を続けてきた。海外直接投資を梃子にした製造業の伸びを背景とした 1980 年代後半以降の経済成長は特に目覚ましい。高度経済成長の過程で、生産面と比べ遅れていた雇用面での産業構造変化も徐々に加速し、タイ経済は労働過剰から不足へと変化し始めた。

タイ労働者の海外出稼ぎは 1970 年代に始まり、中東産油国を中心に急増し、1980 年代初めには 10 万人前後の規模に達した。その後、サウジアラビアとの外交上のトラブルによって急減した中東諸国への出稼ぎは、石油価格の低迷もあって回復していないが、シンガポール、マレーシア、台湾などアジア諸国への出稼ぎ者が増えている。海外で働くタイ人の数は、現在では 40 万人を超えると推計されている。

タイ人の海外出稼ぎが続く一方で、1990 年代に入ってから労働力不足と賃金の上昇は、周辺諸国から多くの合法・不法労働者をタイに引き付けている。1990 年代半ばにはタイ国内で働く外国人労働者は 50 万人を超え、海外で働くタイ労働者数を上回った。この点からいえば、現在、タイは、送出国から受入国へと立場を変え始める「国際労働移動の転換点」にあるといえよう。

1997 年に起きた経済危機による厳しい景気の落ち込みの中で、多くの労働者が失業した。タイ政府は労働者の海外出稼ぎを促進すると同時に、周辺諸国からの流入している労働者に対する締め付けを厳しくしている。しかしながら、長期的にみれば、タイ労働市場の構造変化はこれからも進み、多くの分野で労働力不足が再び顕在化してくるであろう。そうなれば、周辺諸国からの労働者流入はさらに増加していくことになる。先進国経済の経験によれば、経済成長によって国内の雇用機会が増えると、海外への出稼ぎは減ることが期待される。しかしながら、今日では、アジア諸国の相互依存関係が深まって国際間の人的交流は構造的に増えていること、雇用機会などの豊富な情報と安価な交通手段が存在すること、これまでに蓄積されてきた海外雇用の個人的な経験による人的ネットワークが形成されてきたことなどを考えると、国内に雇用機会が増えてもタイ労働者の海外雇用の数はそれほど減らないことが予想される。