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Vietnamese migrant labour and the rise and maintenance of  
the sugarcane boom inside China: causes, conditions,  
consequences

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# **Vietnamese migrant labour and the rise and maintenance of the sugarcane boom inside China: causes, conditions, consequences**

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## **Introduction**

Every year, up to 80,000 Vietnamese cross border into southern China to cut sugarcane from November to March. This is not legally allowed by the Vietnamese government nor the Chinese government. Yet, the rise and maintenance of sugarcane sector in southern China is significantly linked to the availability and willingness of Vietnamese ethnic minorities to sell their labour. When labour recruitment for the Chinese sugarcane sector hits the ground, it has differentiated impact on labour-sending communities. This paper presents research on the impact of Vietnamese migrant labour on the ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. This study aims to provide insights into differentiating impacts of this recent spike in labour market on the rural communities in Vietnam and how this emerging labour regime is maintained on both Vietnamese and Chinese sides of the border.

The study was conducted in Tay and Nung ethnic communities from Hong Phong commune, Cao Loc district, Lang Son province, in the Northeast of Vietnam, which is bordered to the north by China. The study involved both library research and fieldwork in Hong Phong commune. Library research, conducted in order to understand the physical and social structure of Hong Phong, focused on government records and maps and on project reports of the People's Committee of Cao Loc district and Hong Phong communes. Hong Phong was selected because it seemed representative, being of average size, average income status, and one that has been most dependent on remittances as a main source of income.

The analysis pays explicit attention to a. the patterns as to which ethnic groups tend to get into this labour export channel, b. who does not and why c. what the impacts of this labour market on the rural communities in Vietnam in terms of livelihoods. It explores how differentiating impacts of this recent spike in labour market on the rural communities in Vietnam in terms of livelihoods.

## **Literature review: labour migration and crop booms in Asia**

In the literature review, we will provide brief overview of the literature on labour migration in Southeast and East Asia, including its trends, patterns, drivers, and consequences. In addition, the review will relate to a broader picture on 'crop booms' and 'global land grabbing', which are current essential topics in the field of agrarian studies.

### ***Labour migration in Southeast and East Asia***

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another (Vargas-Lundius, Lanly, Villarreal, & Osorio, 2008). Studies on migration suggested that labour migration is an essential feature of economic growth and structural adjustments in the East and Southeast Asia (Athukorala, 2006). Although migration in the region has had a long-lasting history since late 19<sup>th</sup> century, labour migration in Southeast and East Asia entered a novel phase in 1970s, triggered by the uneven economic performance of Asian countries, the greater integration of those nations into the global economy, the redistribution of manufacturing production within and outside the region, and labour shortages at localities (Kaur, 2010). In general, migrants usually come from poorer regions to the more developed or better performing economies (Deshingkar, 2006; Kaur, 2010). In East and Southeast Asia, the major labor-absorbers include Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore,

Malaysia, and Thailand, meanwhile Philippines, Cambodia, Burma, Lao PDR, Viet Nam and Indonesia are considered labour-sending countries (Athukorala, 2006; Kaur, 2010).

As Kelly (2011) noted, migration varies in many aspects (duration, distance, legality, employment prospects, citizenship rights, and gendering) that can provide different useful typologies. However, Southeast Asian migration flows can be categorized into five basic types:

- Transcontinental permanent flows – mainly to immigrant-receiving countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada
- Regional temporary flows – contract labor, within Southeast and East Asia, or to the Middle East
- Intra-national rural-urban flows – to cities and peri-urban areas, usually parts of urbanization and rural livelihood diversification
- National and cross-border rural-rural flows – seasonal migration, (re)settlement of agricultural ‘frontiers’, displacement by land-intensive development processes (incl. crop booms)
- Everyday mobility – increased rural movement due to better transportation vehicles and infrastructure

In our case study, the major movement is cross-border rural-rural flows (from Vietnam to China). However, those seasonal migrations is driven by the labor shortages in crop plantation areas, which are caused by internal labor migration from rural areas to cities and the rising labor cost in China (Liu et al., 2015).

It is worth noting that migration are driven not by a single cause but by a wide range of causal factors, which are sometimes contradictory in specific context (Cole, Wong, & Brockhaus, 2015). Athukorala (2006) examined three sets of factors which influence the amount and direction of migration flows: supply (push) factors (factors affecting the decision of migrants to leave), demand (pull) factors (factors affecting the entry of immigrants), and government policies (that regulates supply and demand factors). He commented that the augmented labour flows in East and Southeast Asia are mainly driven by increasing demands – which are structural rather than temporary. The dwindling domestic labour forces (due to low population growth and transitions of domestic workers to higher-paid jobs) have boosted demand for immigrant workers. To control migration flows, labour-absorbing states have applied different immigration policies towards skilled, less-skilled and illegal (undocumented) migrants (Kaur, 2010). These policies are in line with changing labour market conditions and national development plans, while still upholding national security and minimizing social tensions arisen from the presence of immigrants. However, restrictive policies usually cannot stop migration inflows completely, as settled immigrant groups can establish networks to help newcomer immigrants to settle and get employed (Athukorala, 2006).

One interesting aspect of migration in Asia is the relationships between migration flows and inequalities. The impacts of migration and remittances on inequalities are highly context-specific, depending on economic, political, and social-cultural structures that define wealth, power, and opportunity within communities (Deshingkar, 2006). Migration may be used by the poor as a livelihood strategy to escape from poverty and scarcity of resources, thus reducing inequalities, but the rich may accumulate higher benefits from migration decisions, hence widening inequalities (Rigg, 2007). Migration may be prompted by income inequalities and uneven development between regions, and also shaped by non-income inequalities such

as age (Barney, 2012), gender (Donato, Gabaccia, Holdaway, Manalansan IV, & Pessar, 2006), ethnicity (Eilenberg & Wadley, 2009), or caste and tribes (Deshingkar & Start, 2003). Lastly, many works in migration studies have analyzed the impacts of migration and remittances on local livelihoods and land-use. There is an ongoing debate about whether remittances sent to rural areas can be spent to invest into improving agricultural productivity, or they may instead increase consumption and economic dependence on migrant household member (Cole et al., 2015). While the importance of remittance spending on agricultural production and land use is still under question, studies have shown that the investments are rare in poor regions with weak infrastructure, failing markets, or fragile and unfavorable environments (Cole et al., 2015; Davis, Carletto, & Winters, 2010).

### ***Crop booms, migration, and land grabbing***

Rural studies see migration as both contributing factor and consequences of agrarian transitions (Cole et al., 2015). Economic development stimulates commercialization and homogenization of land use, thus promoting the need for livelihood diversification. Researchers have studied the linkages between labour migration in Asia and the phenomenon called ‘crop booms’ (Hall, 2011a, 2011b). ‘Crop booms’, according to Hall, could be defined as occurring when there is a rapid conversion of large areas of land to a monocrop or near-monocrop, and when the investments span for more than one year (mainly because the crop is a tree crop that takes at least some years to mature and start producing). The major boom crops in Asia include cocoa, coffee, fast-growing trees (e.g. eucalyptus), oil palm, pepper, rubber, and shrimp (Hall, 2011a). Researchers have documented some prominent examples of crop booms in Southeast Asia: *cocoa* boom in Sulawesi, Indonesia since 1980 (Neilson, 2007); coffee boom in Vietnam since mid-1990s (Ha & Shively, 2008); *oil palm* expansion in Malaysia and Indonesia since 1960s (De Koninck, 2006; McCarthy & Cramb, 2009); and *shrimp farming* boom in Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam since mid-1980s (Hall, 2004). Crop booms may inhibit or promote migration, as they can encourage indigenous people to stay (or return home) to collect product booms, or bring flows of immigrants to compensate for the labor shortages (Hall, 2011b).

In China, several crop booms have been observed in recent decades: sugarcane since 1990s, eucalyptus since 2000s, and banana in recent years (Liu et al., 2015; Yaojian, 2003; Zhang, Kono, & Kobayashi, 2014). The shortages of labour caused by internal migration to coastal cities has led to the season flows of informal and illegal migrant workers from Vietnam and Myanmar to work sugarcane cutters, porters, and bag sewers, almost every year, since 1980s (Liu et al., 2015).

### **Research findings**

#### ***Natural, economic, social and cultural characteristics of research site***

Hong Phong commune locates at the Northwest of Lang Son province. It is 5 kilometers from the commune to the Dong Dang district center and 15 kilometers by the highway number 1B to Vietnam- China border gate (Friendship checking point). The commune consists of 10 villages with 678 households and 2938 persons almost equal between male (1458) and female (1480). Two main ethnic minority groups are Tay and Nung occupying 95.6% of total population of the commune and the left are the Kinh and other ethnic groups. The Tay group is considered as the native people of commune. Different to the low land people, the Tay people have their own system of forest management and their forest land is traditionally the slash and burn cultivation. Practicing both low rain fed rice and shifting cultivation, land of Tay people is inheriting from generation to generation. The State allocated both agricultural and forest land to Tay people based on that customs. In Hong Phong commune, the Tay people live together along the main roads and have higher economic and political status. The Nung group was moving from China to the commune about 50-60 years ago. As the later comers, almost Nung households have no forest land but they are also allocated rice land. In

Na Luoc village for example, the Nung people have only the rice land. Forest surrounding the village belongs to Tay people from nearby villages. Although there is the mix of ethnic groups within the commune normally each village in Hong Phong commune is typical by one ethnic group.

**Table 1: Population indicators of Hong Phong commune**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Unit</b>		<b>%</b>
<i>Total household</i>	<i>HH</i>	678	100.0
<i>Agricultural household</i>	<i>HH</i>	449	66.2
<i>Non-agricultural household</i>	<i>HH</i>	229	33.8
<i>Total population</i>	<i>Person</i>	2938	100.0
<i>Female</i>	<i>Person</i>	1480	50.4
<i>Male</i>	<i>Person</i>	1458	49.6
<i>Tay people</i>	<i>Person</i>	1482	50.4
<i>Nung people</i>	<i>Person</i>	1328	45.2
<i>Kinh people</i>	<i>Person</i>	121	4.1
<i>Other ethnic grpup</i>	<i>Person</i>	7	0.2
<i>Total labor</i>	<i>Labor</i>	2173	100.0
<i>Number of villages</i>	<i>Village</i>	10	100.0

*Source: Statistical data on population survey of Hong Phong people committee, 2016*

The total land area of Hong Phong commune is 1067.4 hectares. Most of land in the commune is agricultural land (702.5 hectares or 65.8% total land area). The cultivable land, especial rice land is limited (41.2% of agricultural land or 27.1% total land area). There are the small terrace fields along the streams surrounding the villages. Forest land of Hong Phong commune is 409.6 hectares (58.3% of agricultural land or 38.4% total land area) which was allocated to households based on their traditional inheriting system. The land use certificate is also providing to land owners. There are also the lime stone mountains which are exploiting by the private companies from Lang son city. Most people in Hong Phong commune (80%) consider themselves as agriculture producers although the non-farm activities, especially the cross-border wage jobs are practicing by many households and consist of increasing important proportion of household income. The agricultural production of the commune is practicing by the small farmers with high level of subsistence. There is no large –scale or industrial farms. The cultivation and forestry are the main sources of income. Animal production and aquaculture are not well developed in the commune. There is the different level of income among the ethnic groups in Hong Phong commune. Many Tay households are rich while the Nung people are living in the moderate condition. Na Luoc village of Nung people is classified as the “*extremely difficult village*” in the government program of poverty reduction among the ethnic minority groups.

**Table 2: Land indicator in Hong Phong commune**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Area (ha)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Total land area</b>	<b>1067.4</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Agricultural land</i>	<i>702.5</i>	<i>65.8</i>
Agricultural production land	289.5	41.2
Forest land	409.6	58.3
Aquacultural land	3.4	0.5
<i>Non-agricultural land</i>	<i>185.7</i>	<i>17.4</i>

Source: Statistical data on land indicator of Hong Phong people committee, 2016

### **Migration to China in locale**

Living in this low fertile upland area, the local poor families have to face the drought and lack of cultivation land every year. It is the fact that most of the rice field is one crop and people cannot plant vegetable due to the lack of water. The local families also have upland field, but the soil has been degraded so far. Most of the upland area is used for cassava plantation. Recently, some families have been planting cinnamon and sweet fennel (*Illicium verum*) in their upland area and in their back yard. However, it will take several years for them to harvest them.

Most of the interviewed people confirm that they do not have any livelihood alternatives and are always in the status of jobless, especially after harvesting time in this "isolated area" (called by the interviewees). Walking around local villages, we can easily see that most people staying at home are the old and children. The limited income source of the local families has made young people go out to other communes or provinces or industrial parks to find job. Some young people even go to industrial park in Bac Giang to work.

The poor women who are at the age of 35 or older are very difficult to find a job in the local industrial park. They can only stay at home to work on their rice field, plant some vegetable for family consumption. They, therefore, are the main source of labor to go to China for sugar cane cutting. It is interesting that the interviewee said that the China employers prefer women to work for them than men. They believe that women work harder than men do, and do not cause any troubles in the working area. In addition, some women can communicate in the local dialect with the Chinese employers.

*We do the sugar cane cutting for China households. Most of China bosses like to hire women since we worked in their sugar cane fields, we ate and rested in their house only. We do not quarrel and smoke like the men do. Some men even drank alcohol and caused violation. It was annoyed the Chinese employer. So, they prefer to hire women. Actually, the Chinese do not limit the age, so we - at all age - even very old people can go to work for them. We only need health!*

*Interview of Ms. Ha in Na Luoc village, 2017*

The question thrown to the discussion among villagers was how they spent their money gained from sugar cane cutting and whether it was one of the main income sources of their families. It was found out that both men and women go to China for work, but the work varies. Young men often go to local factories in China to work and the wage is fairly high which is around 450USD per month excluding accommodation and meals. According to one young guy in Na Luoc village, the money he gained from working the small factories in China after one year were used for building small house for his family. However, the work was very hard there and now he returned home to find job. Most young men go to work in China longer, at least one or two year so they can save more money for their bigger purpose.

*I will not go to China to work again. The work was very hard, we had to work 12 hours per day, the food for us was not good and it was very hard to eat. Additionally, we went to work illegally, and every two or three months the Chinese police often came to check and we had to hide or shut our mouth (to pretend to be Chinese wage labor). I feel so scared. If I were arrested, I would be sent back to Vietnam and lost my wage.*

*Interview of Mr. Thang, Na Lam village, 2017*

Unlike young men, most of middle age women got to Chinese sugarcane farm to work only seasonally. Their income varies according to season and the availability of labor source. However, most of the interviewees agreed that the income of 2017 from sugar cane cutting was around 12-15 USD per day. On average, women often work on sugar cane farm around one month, so they normally can bring back home about 400-450USD. Every year, those women go to work in the sugar cane farm after harvesting which means from October (lunar calendar) to 23rd of December (lunar calendar). Every 3 years, they can go to plant new sugar cane after lunar New Year festival (until March) but this work requires not much labor. The money gained from sugar cane has been called "multi-purpose" budget. The women used this money for paying school fees for their children, for the food they have to buy in the market (like meat, tofu, junk food for kids, etc.), electricity, local festivals or ceremonies, and also reinvestment such as seedling. The total budget for those activities has been estimated around 200 -300 USD per year for a poor family which is exactly equivalent to the budget collected from sugar cane cutting.

*If we do not go to cut sugar cane, we do not know from which source we can have money for our everyday need and for our kids. The drought prevents us to cultivate and for recent years the price of agricultural products like maize has been very low. The income from maize selling even sometimes cannot afford seedlings, fertilizers and chemical pesticide.*

*Interview in Na Luoc village, 2017*

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One important aspect of migration to China sugar cane farms is the role of migration networks in the journey of cross border migrants. Firstly, the decision to go to work in China is usually not an individual's decision rather it is made through the consensus of the whole family. Even though the migrants made decision by themselves, the ideas of the family members such as parents, brothers, relatives and particular spouses are more appreciated. In the case that the numerous migrants are women and the rising concern of lacking women in China, even it is humor, the husband's agreement is necessary to women migration. In fact, cross border migration is adopted by most households as a household strategy rather than an individual response. This point was stressed by both migrants and the people left behind in almost interviews and discussions.

**Box 1: The consensus of husband while wife goes to China**

*In my village, annually there are about 15 persons go to work in China in which there are 8 people working in cutting sugar cane. Those sugar cane cutters are women. In order to go to working in sugar cane farms, there is necessary to have the consensus of husband and wife. If the wife wants to go but the husband does not agree, the wife cannot.*

*Interview with Tenh Che's formal village headman, 2017*

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goods transporters while women work for the sugar cane farms in China. There are few men working for sugar cane farms. According to the villagers, Chinese sugar cane farm owners want to hire women because in comparison to men, women do not make the troubles. They are also hardworking people.

**Table 3: Migrants to China in Hong Phong commune (2013-2016)**

Year	Tay ethnic group			Nung ethnic group			Other groups			Total		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
2016	9	17	26	27	38	65	0	1	1	36	56	<b>92</b>
2015	12	25	37	12	36	48	0	0	0	24	61	<b>85</b>
2014	13	22	35	38	62	100	0	1	1	51	85	<b>136</b>
2013	4	6	10	16	17	33	0	0	0	20	23	<b>43</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>356</b>

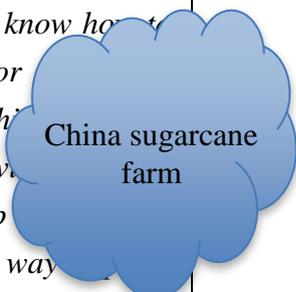
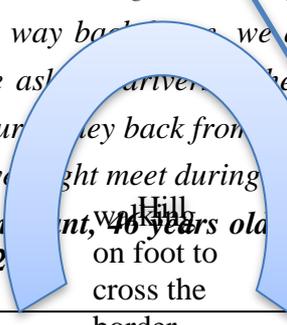
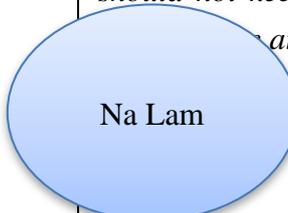
Source: Report of Hong Phong people committee.

**Migration network through the Chinese-Vietnamese marriage**

The main network of cross border migration to sugar cane farms in China is through the formal network of Chinese – Vietnamese marriage, normally the Vietnamese women got married with Chinese man. The migrants report that at the beginning their journey they go to China according to the introduction of their neighbors or friends in the villages who got married with Chinese man. There are also some other Chinese owners who come to village to recruit labor but most of them have previous contacts with villagers through the network of Chinese - Vietnamese women. These Chinese-Vietnamese women keep contacts with their family. They accompanied by their husbands and kids visit home occasionally during the Tet holidays or other family events. They seem to be the successful early migration generation of villages. Their family in China has the sugar cane plantations. They can also call their relatives whenever they need labor or they know that there is the need of labor in China.

**Box 2: Migration network through Chinese –Vietnamese marriage**

*I went to China to work for sugar cane plantation since 2014. In my village, there are the women who get married with the Chinese man. These women introduce that the Chinese sugar cane plantations need labor to work for them. Thus, I go with 4 other women in my village and one of them is a relative of that Chinese - Vietnamese woman. She has her phone number and keeps contact though the whole journey. We took a taxi from village to the border and illegally cross border to China. The Chinese - Vietnamese woman had arranged the car for us in China and it took us about 5 hours to the sugar cane plantation. We had to go in the small local roads but not the highways to avoid the police because we were illegally migrants. We can pay the transportation cost later when we get salary of the owners. Without the support of Chinese – Vietnamese woman, we could not know how to get there and how to live in China. We went to China just a month prior (normally January), then we come back home during Tet holidays because Chinese also do not work during the Tet. On the way back home we also were advised should not keep money by ourselves. We ask the driver to help us to keep money at the border, we will take our money back from the driver. This way we avoid polices and bad people who might meet during our journey. Go by car either of hiring a motorbike or on foot to cross the border.*



Interview female migrant, 46 years old, in Quyen village, Hong Phong commune, 2014. Go by car either of hiring a motorbike or on foot to cross the border.

## Figure 1. Sketch map of road to China sugar cane farm

Source: Group discussion in Na Lam village, 2017.

### Migration network through the acquaintances from formal migrants

Beside the introduction of Chinese – Vietnamese women, the cross-border migrants also have the helps from the people who used to work in China. Normally, these relatives, friends or neighbors ask other villagers to go together to work in China. Through this network of kinship and neighborhood, the migrants trust on their friends or neighbors who used to work in sugar cane farms and the old ones can help the new ones in their first stage of migration. Then these experiencing migrants also help other new migrants.

Many ethnic people in Hong Phong commune used to go to China in previous period even prior to the government officially open the border gate to China. These people have introducing the jobs to the next migrants. As the local people use their own term “*người truyền người*” (people carrying people) as the way to cross border migration.

### Box 3: Migration network from formal migrants

*Villagers used to work for Chinese people since 1989 before the officially opening border gate in 1991-1992. Cross border migration to cutting sugar cane has erupting in Na Lam village 3-4 years ago. Until now, there are about 60 persons in this village has been working for sugar cane farms in China. At first, there are their acquaintances who used to work in China come back to village and introduce jobs to villagers. They said that the sugar cane farm owners need labor so the villagers follow that introduction to go to China. They can also call from China to their relatives to come to work there. The cross-border migrants normally go as a group of 5-6 peoples.*

*Interview a policeman Na Lam village, Hong Phong commune, 2017*

social network, which mostly based on the kinship. The left behind members, mostly the husbands also believe in a safe journey of their spouses. In term of economic benefit, social network is an important aspect that minimizes the transportation, living costs and risks and hence it is fundamental factor influencing decisions to migrate of women to China. The migration in Hong Phong commune is mostly based on the strong social networks that have already been built from the first migrant generations whether it was the network through marriage. The women mostly go to work in Chinese sugar cane farms whenever they are ensured about the work, the safety transportation, the safety living place and the security of earnings.

### Do migrant need to pay for the recruiter?

Because the cross-border migrants to cutting sugar cane rely more on the network of friendship or kinship, they no need to pay for the recruiters. We have no evident of paying for the middle men/women from our interviews to the migrants. They all report that they receive the helps from their friends or neighbors. According to the migrants, the owners of sugar cane farms in China are lacking labor. They have large farms while their children are working far from home so they need labor to work for them. However, we see that there is a kind of bonus that the labor recruiters might receive. At the border in China side, there are the “*labor markets*” where gather the migrant labors from Vietnam. In this gather points, there are the

middle men/women who can speak Chinese and Tay or Nung. These people introduce to the migrants and guide them to the villages that have the sugar cane farms. The migrants can choose among the villages if they have some information about those villages. Those guiders might receive the bonus from the sugar cane owners if they are success in introducing them the good migrants.

**Box 4: Payment for the labor recruiter**

*To work as sugar can cutter in China, I no need to pay for the recruiter and there is no recruiter. I follow my friend in my village to work in sugar can farms in China. She asks me to go together because she used to work there. We work for the same owners. I no need to pay her any money. That is the way villagers help each other. However, I have heard that other people might need to pay for the middle men/women, for example a day the owners give us 80 Yuan but she said only 70 Yuan then she kept money for the migrants. When migrants read the border, she will give back to them. I do not know if it is the truth.*

***Interview a migrant, 46 years old, Con Quyen village, Hong Phong commune, 2017***

**Earnings of migrant workers in cutting canes inside China**

Higher income is the main driving force of migrant workers to cross border to work in sugar cane farms. The migrants can receive wage by time or by product depending on the negotiation between them and the owners. The wage also is increasing year by year. In 2014, the migrants can receive 60 Yuan per day and in 2016 they receive 80 Yuan per day. This wage level is known by all migrants and they use that to negotiate to the owners. Another way to receive wage is by product. The owners will base on the number of bundle of sugar cane that the migrants can cut to pay the wage. Normally the price to cut a bundle of sugar cane is 2 Yuan. This price includes cutting and carrying to the corner of the field, then there is the truck will come to pick that bundle. A normal migrant can cut 40-50 bundle of sugar cane so they also receive from 80-100 Yuan per day.

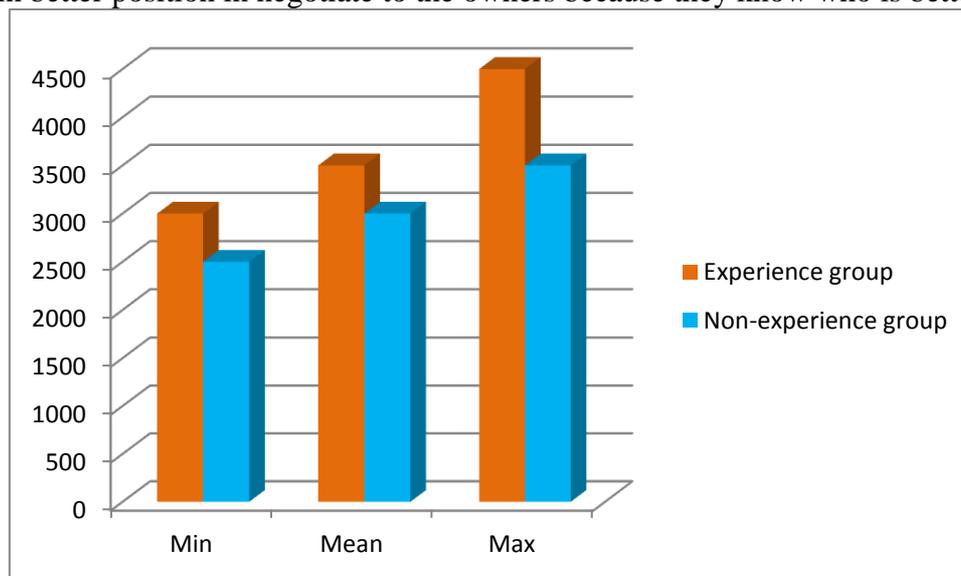
Beside the wage, the lucky migrants can get the meals and living space from the owners. Although these are the simple meals and basis living spaces, the migrants feel good with this support because they can save their money.

**Box 5: Earnings from cutting sugar cane in China**

*My wage is paid by number bundle of sugar cane I have cut. It is 2 Yuan per bundle. Each day, I can earn averagely 70 Yuan, someday I work harder and I can earn 80 to 90 Yuan. My owners give me 3 meals a day freely. At night I stay in his house and I no need to pay. He had built a house for the migrants and he live in his own house. There are about 20 migrant workers working for him. He even brings meals to the sugar cane fields for the workers. I have 1 hour for lunch. Depending to the owners, most of them pay the wage always in due. However, some of them are so mean. The migrants are not provided the meals and they had to cook by themselves.*

***Interview a 36 years old woman in Con Quyen village, Hong Phong commune, 2017***

Because cutting sugar cane is not last a long time, normally the migrant workers go to China in the period of 20-25 days or up to a month for one time. They work from owner to owner. They just ask the money for their living there but not all the wage. Until they want to go back home in Vietnam so they return back from the owners they have worked for to collect wage. They do not want to keep money with them because they are afraid the robbers or bad men who can steel their money. They believe in the owners who can help to keep their money. There are slight differences between the earnings of experience and non-experience groups of migrant workers. The results from interview show that the experience workers can avoid some risks and they can have higher earnings in comparison to non-experience group. They are also in better position in negotiate to the owners because they know who is better owners.

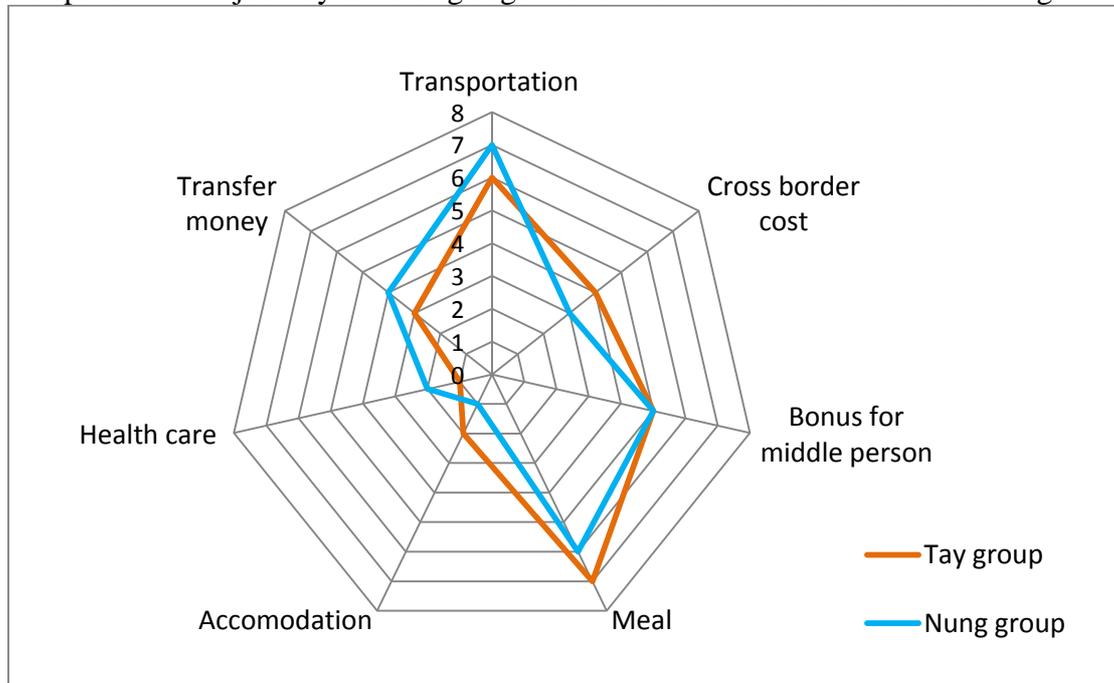


**Figure 2: Earning differences between experience and non-experience migrants**

The income from cutting sugar cane in China depends also on the cost that migrant workers had to pay. Although the migrants no need to pay for the recruiter, there are several kind of cost related direct or indirect to the recruitment and to the whole journey to China that migrants had to pay. Firstly, they had to pay the transportation cost from their village to border and from border to sugar cane farms. This transportation even cost 140 Yuan single way (from border to sugar cane field or return) to ensure that they do not meet the police and other troubles. Secondly, they had to pay for the border fee. Most of them go through the jungle track to avoid the customers and policemen and they can escape from paying an amount of 150 Yuan per fee. However, this is illegal and dangerous way to cross border. There is another option too. After Tet, during Dong Dang festival, the border gate is opened to both Chinese and Vietnamese to enter their border within a day. The migrants use this event to enter Chinese land and they had to pay 20 Yuan. Beside transportation and cross border cost, most of migrants also had to pay for the meals. This is the cost that many migrant workers is trying to reduce it. They have many tactics in which they cook together to save time and cost. In average, each day, the migrant spends about 5 to 6 Yuan for the meals. The transportation cost and fee for the middle person are fixed so to save money, the migrants had to reduce cost for their meals. For the health care, some of them might get sick during the time they work in sugar cane farms. However, the Chinese owners know that it is illegal to hire the Vietnamese migrants so they treat them well when the migrants got sick. They buy medicines to workers because they are afraid that they might be charged by law if the workers die. Most migrants appreciate the responsibility of the owners. To make sure that

the earnings from cutting sugar cane is kept in safe, some migrants have asked the helps from their Chinese – Vietnamese relatives or friends. They give their money to that person to put in their bank account and transfer money to relatives in Vietnam. By banking system, the migrants will take it back when they are in Vietnam. They had to pay a fee up to 40 Yuan for these Chinese- Vietnamese women.

We also ask the migrant workers from both Tay and Nung group ranking the cost that they had to spend in their journey to cutting sugar cane in China. The results as following:



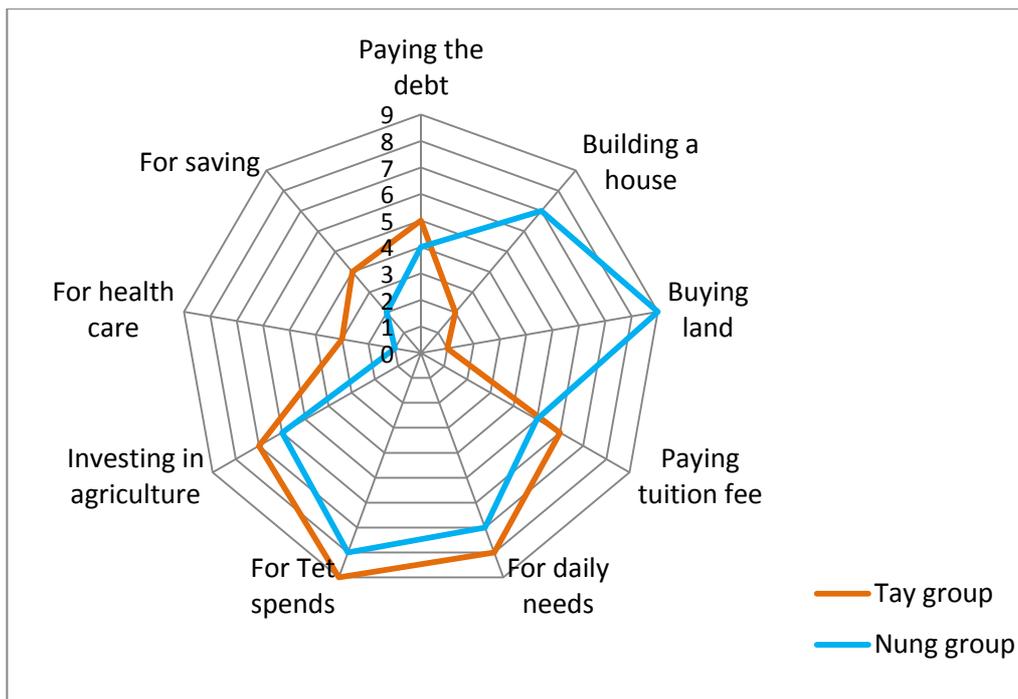
**Figure 3: Ranking the cost of migration**

**Note:** From 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest)

The cost for transportation and meals are ranking at highest cost that the migrants spend during the migration journey. Other cost such as the health care, transfer money and accommodation is ranked at the lowest level. Normally after a period of 25 days to a month, the migrants can have a net income from 2000-3000 Yuan (equal to 6-7 million VND).

### Remittance use

For most migrants, because the income from agricultural production in their villages is low, going to cutting sugar cane in China is the way to increase income and cover the daily cost of the family. In comparison to other activities such as collecting firewood, animal production or other agricultural activities, the income from cutting sugar cane is high. Because the migrants go to China prior to the Tet, so this income also is used to cover the expenditures for the Tet holiday. The other main purpose of using earnings from cutting sugar cane in China is to invest in agricultural production. They can build the animal cages, buying seedlings, fertilizer and other inputs for agricultural production. Some households also use that money to pay the tuition fee for their children, especially for higher education.



**Figure 4: Using earning from cutting sugar cane inside China**

*Source: Group discussion, Hong Phong commune, 2017.*

In comparison to Tay migrants, Nung migrant workers use their earnings for building a house or buying the land at the highest amount. The reason is that the Nung migrant workers have going to China earlier. Since 2008, they have starting their works in China. They also stay in a longer time to cutting sugar cane inside China. Some households, there are more than 1 member going together to cut sugar cane. Therefore, they earn higher than the Tay migrant workers. The second reason is that the Nung people in Hong Phong commune, especially in Na Luoc village are living in moderate conditions. Their village locates in the remote area where there is no pavement road. Their village is considered as “*extremely poor*” of the commune. At the time we did this research, there is a project to build the road to village but it is about 100 meters far from the village. Thus, the Nung in Na Luoc village want to buy land next to the main roads to have a better life. The old village of Na Luoc is still there in the sloppy hill but about 10 households have been able to buy a piece of land near the commune center. The price of a piece of land 5 years ago is about 5 million VND and now is 40 million VND. Therefore, once earnings from cutting sugar cane are gathered into the household savings, it is possible to buy land.

Some households use their earnings from cutting sugar cane to cover their debts and spending for cultural and community events such as marriage and funeral. The migrants report that these spends are costly to them and the income from agricultural production is so low to cover all family’s expenditures.

**Box 6: Different pattern of using remittance**

*Last year I went to China to cutting sugar cane in a period of 1 month. I can bring back home 8 million VND (3000 Yuan). I paid 5 million VND for the government debt that I borrow few years ago to support my son in finding his job. The left 3 million VND, I spend for the daily life and for the Tet.*

*Interview with a female migrant, 42 years old, Tenh Che village, Hong Phong commune, 2017*

*My family has planted 200 anise trees since 1995. We can harvest anise only 5 years ago until now. However, it is not every year but every 3 years, the anise brings the good harvest. I collect anise and carry them to the center of Hong Phong commune to sell it. It is the main source of income in my family. I have 3 cows too and every 4 years I can sell one bull. In average, I earn 14-15 million VND as total income for the whole family. That amount is not enough to cover all the spend such as visiting, festival, ceremony, marriage, funeral, health care, education. We had to go to cutting sugar*

### **The duration of migration to the sugar cane farm in China**

The duration and the time of migration depend firstly on the labor demand from Chinese sugar cane farms. The Vietnamese labor demand of these farms is high during the harvest time. Normally, it lasts from November to January (from October to the end of December, lunar calendar). The other time of the planting period from February to April the Vietnamese labor demand is also high. The Tet (Lunar New Year) breaks the harvest and planting period but it is not always the clear cut because of the weather and the farms' situation. The migrant workers from Vietnam normally go to China to work in the sugar cane farms about 3 months before Tet and also 3 months after Tet as the longest.

#### **Box 7: The migration seasons**

*Normally in a year, the migrant workers go two times to China to work for the sugar cane farms. The first time, they go to China from the October 1 to December 23 (Lunar calendar, this is the day to pray for the kitchen spirits and is considered as the starting of New Year holidays). They stay at home during the Tet. The second time, they go to China from January 15 (after Dong Dang festival) to the end of March (Lunar calendar) then they come back home. During the summer they stay at home and work on their land*

*Interview with the head of Hong Phong commune, 2017*

migrants said that staying longer in China is not good because they might be losing their money once they are arrested by policeman.

At home, the possibilities encouraging the cross-border migrant workers going to cut sugar cane in China relate to their arrangements and labor division within households. The seasonal calendar of migrant households in Hong Phong commune shows that the leisure season of

almost households is from after the harvest of summer rice to the harvest of spring rice (from October to April). They can arrange the agricultural activities and household works in which a member can go to China to cut sugar cane.

**Table 3: Seasonal calendar of migrants**

RICE PRODUCTION	Main responsibility	MONTHS (LUNAR CALENDAR)											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Seedlings	women	■											
Land preparation, water pumping	man		■										
Transplanting fertilizing	women			■									
Weeding and cultivating	women				■	■							
Harvesting, preparing for summer rice	man and women						■						
Fertilizing	man							■					
Cultivating and caring	women								■	■			
Harvesting summer rice	man and women										■		
<b>CASAVA PRODUCTION</b>													
Planting	women		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			
Harvesting	man and women										■		
<b>MAIZE PRODUCTION</b>													
Planting	man and women	■	■										
Cultivating	women			■	■	■							
Harvesting	man and women						■						
<b>NON -FARM JOBS</b>													
Planting sugar cane in China	women	■	■										
Cutting sugar cane in China	women			■							■	■	■
Transport goods from China	men		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

Source: Group discussion, Na Lam village, Hong Phong commune, 2017.

### **The implications for the labor-sending communities**

Cross-border migration to cut sugar cane in China is household strategy to improve the income of families in Hong Phong commune. The villagers said that going to China to cut sugar cane is good to have higher income to the families. The agricultural production brings low income and depends on the weather. Last year (2016-2017), Hong Phong commune faces the extremely drought. The villagers said that there is no rain in 6 months. The migrants also cannot find another job in industrial companies because they do not meet the requirements of the companies. Thus cross border to cut sugar cane is a good opportunity for them.

Beside the opportunities to have higher income, the risks of cross border migration are specific to migrant workers, their families and the communities. As illegal migration, the migrant workers face the risks coming from governmental bodies in both Vietnam and China sites. The migrants do not have the laissez-passer passport so they had to climb the hills and follow the jungle tracks to cross border and avoid the police. In China site, they also need to follow the small local roads to their working places. They are in the danger of being arrested by the police at any time. The risks that the migrants face also come from other people include the sugar cane farm owners. They have no power to negotiate with the owners in the case of disagreement. They might not receive wage or had to work harder or longer time.

#### **Box 8: The risks of migrants**

*The owners do not pay for us right after we finish our job. Until the day we go back to Vietnam, we ask our money. Because we cannot speak Chinese so we had to accept the amount that the owners pay. We also had to work in a long time as the demand of owners, some days we had to work up to 12-14 hours but the same wage. We have no way to negotiate. If they do not pay us, we also cannot take the legal proceedings against them and if we are arrested by police we do not know when we can come back home so we never think of against the owners. The worst case is that the migrants were not paid even the robbers were informed our journey and they take all of money we have*  
*Interview with a female migrant, 43 years old, Tenh Che village, Hong Phong commune, 2017.*

#### **Roles played by local governmental and non-governmental organisations and communities in prevention: Constraints and challenges**

At the present, there is no intervention of local government and non-governmental organizations to the cross-border migration in Hong Phong commune. The migrants receive no support to avoid the risks they face during the migration journey. The local government aware the phenomena and the report on illegal migration from Vietnam to China is made every year in which there are the name of migrants and the date that they go to China. From the interviews to local leaders, we see that they seem agree with migration and consider cross border migration is a good opportunity to villagers to have better income.

#### **Box 9: The opinion of local leader on cross-border migration**

*As the government officer, I also do the propaganda to advice people not to go to China because this is illegal migration. If they have no laissez passer passport, they can be arrested by the Chinese police and it is terrible for them. There are few cases happened in this commune. They were sent to Ho Chi Minh city and the family had to spend a lot of money to bring them back. However, we cannot prevent the migrants to go to China, they do not inform us, they hide their journey and there are the guiders. If we do not allow them to go this way, they find another way.*

*Interview with the chairman of Hong Phong commune, 2017.*

## **Conclusions**

As the case of Hong Phong Commune illustrates, the number of Vietnamese migrants cross border into southern China to cut sugarcane from November to March is increasing. This is not legally allowed by the Vietnamese government. This is not legally allowed by the Chinese government. Yet, the rise and maintenance of sugarcane sector in southern China is significantly linked to the availability and willingness of cheap Vietnamese ethnic minorities to sell their labour. When labour recruitment for the Chinese sugarcane sector hits the ground, it has differentiated impact on labour-sending communities: patterns as to which ethnic groups tend to get into this labour export channel, and who do not, and why; what are the impacts of this recent spike in labour market on the rural communities in Vietnam in terms of livelihoods. The findings demonstrate the usual labour loss and their implications for the labour-sending communities, while the flipside of it is the positive livelihood effects of remittances. This also recasts some of the relations of representation and power in the communities. Maintenance of this emerging labour regime remains fragile, as it is sensitive both in China and Vietnam – and villagers use various ways to get plugged into the labour recruitment channels both avoiding and conniving with the police authorities, depending on specific situations. Stepping back and looking at the big picture, we will engage with the broader conversation on global land grabbing, with emphasis on the character and direction of land, labour and capital flows, and attempt to fill in important gaps or tension in the literature, including missing crop boom inside China (this such happened, and how this is maintained – which we argue, is partly due to the availability of cheap Vietnamese labour).



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