Skill the low-skilled: the knowledge-driven stepwise migration of Vietnamese workers in South China

Kejie Huang[1] and Tianlong You[2*]

*Correspondence:
tyou0410@gmail.com

[1] Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences, Guangzhou, China
[2] School of Ethnology and Sociology, Yunnan University, Kunming, China

Abstract

This article investigates the interplay between knowledge acquisition and the stepwise migration trajectories of low-skilled Vietnamese workers in China. Utilizing a rich array of data garnered from face-to-face interviews, customized surveys, on-site observations, media narratives, and an archival review of government regulations in Guangxi—a province bordering Vietnam—and in Guangdong, a non-adjacent province, this study proposes an analytical framework, skill-driven migration, to highlight the synergy between the pre-migratory socio-demographic attributes of migrants and the circumstances prevailing in both the places of origin and destination which orchestrates distinct job allocations and skill augmentation avenues. Notably, our study underscores that the competencies acquired in manufacturing employments potentially broaden the horizon of destinations for migrants in their subsequent stepwise migration endeavors. This phenomenon, in turn, poses intricate immigration management quandaries for newly emerged destination nations like China, spotlighting a nuanced dimension of labor mobility and policy frameworks in the evolving regional economic integration. Last, our findings challenge the conventional dichotomy of high-skilled and low-skilled categories of labor migration, as well as the dichotomy of explicit-tacit knowledge.

Keywords: Knowledge acquisition, Labor migration, Stepwise migration, Vietnamese migrant, China

Introduction

Over the past four decades, China has experienced a remarkable surge in cross-border trade with neighboring countries, a phenomenon that has catalyzed a significant influx of migrants from these nations. Drawn by prospects of enhanced employment, educational opportunities, matrimonial prospects, and entrepreneurial ventures, a considerable populace from countries such as Myanmar and Vietnam have migrated to China (Dai et al., 2013). Prior to the global pandemic, several of China's port cities, particularly those along the southwestern frontier, observed an ascending trend in migration, prominently from Myanmar and Vietnam (Duan, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). For instance, the port of Dongxing in Guangxi recorded an astounding 12 million exits and entries in

2019, predominantly by Vietnamese. Increasingly, however, these Vietnamese migrants, initially perceived as border residents, are being discovered in locales considerably distant from China's southwestern borderlands (Liang et al., 2019).

This investigation illuminates the diverse migratory pathways undertaken by Vietnamese migrants across the border regions of Guangxi and within the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong, unraveling the intricate nexus between knowledge acquisition and migratory tendencies. Preceding inquiries have predominantly centered upon the accrual of human capital through migration, especially emphasizing the explicit skills furnished through formal education, whilst overlooking the acquisition of tacit skills via both formal and informal channels, and the impetus for migration rendered by these newly acquired competencies (Baláž et al., 2021; Huynh & Vo, 2023; Kureková & Žilinčíková, 2023; Moroşanu et al., 2021). Moreover, prevalent discourse typically delves into one or two segments of stepwise migration, scarcely addressing the pre-migratory circumstances of migrants and the socio-cultural linkages between origin and destination locales (Grabowska & Jastrzebowska, 2022; Segersven et al., 2023). Lastly, conventional literature categorizes labor migrants indistinctly into "skilled" and "unskilled" cohorts based on their explicit skills, neglecting the potential for so-called unskilled workers to cultivate tacit skills, thereby enhancing their mobility and possibly extending their migratory journeys (Hercog & Cangià, 2021; Jephcote et al., 2023).

Employing a rich array of data harvested from tailored surveys, profound interviews, and extensive field excursions, this study furnishes a comprehensive portrayal of the extensive and multi-faceted migration currents of Vietnamese migrants within China (Paul, 2011). Our findings elucidate that stepwise migration, encompassing places of origin, transitional halts, and ultimate destinations, is partially propelled by the distinct skills and knowledge of the migrants. We unveil that, firstly, Vietnamese individuals from northern, as well as from mid and southern regions of Vietnam, who boast divergent pre-migration socio-demographic profiles, often pursue disparate job opportunities in varied locales in China; secondly, the skills and knowledge subsequently amassed from their diverse job engagements in China may guide them to different subsequent destinations; and thirdly, on certain occasions, their tacit skills have facilitated their ascent both geographically and socio-economically.

The ensuing discourse is organized as follows: Initially, we formulate an analytical framework synthesizing the scholarly narratives on skill acquisition and migration; subsequently, we delineate our methodologies for data collection and analysis; thereafter, we furnish contextual insights concerning China and Vietnam, accentuating the migratory legacy of the latter; subsequently, we expound on the aforementioned findings; and ultimately, we encapsulate our conclusions and proffer policy recommendations rooted in our discoveries.

Knowledge-driven stepwise migration

Human capital embodies a broad range of skill competence acquired via formal education or work experiences. These competences encompass both measurable and immeasurable skills, encapsulating attributes such as social abilities, ambition, and motivation (Lulle et al., 2021; Williams & Baláž, 2005). Skills are delineated as the

application of information accompanied by a specified level of manual, verbal, or mental proficiency, constituting "a body of information about the theoretical and practical understanding of a subject" (Hsieh et al., 2012), conventionally recognized as knowledge. However, prevailing literature predominantly centers on the acquisition of measurable, explicit knowledge, typically manifesting as measurable skills honed through formal education, while largely overlooking the unmeasurable, tacit knowledge. This tacit dimension is a pivotal facet of informal skills and human capital in general (Baláž et al., 2021; Hagan, et al., 2018).

Unlike explicit knowledge, which can be earned usually via formal means, tacit knowledge, embedded in "the senses, tactile experiences, movement skills, intuition, unarticulated mental models, or implicit rules of thumb" (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009), often arises from personal experiences involving informal learning of behaviors and procedures (Howells, 2000). Migration, presenting individuals from less developed regions with avenues to secure job opportunities seldom available in their home countries, concurrently serves as a platform for skill learning (Baláž, et al., 2021). However, the prevailing scholarship, eclipsed by the explicit-tacit knowledge dichotomy, generally overlooks informal knowledge and bypasses certain explicit knowledge domains that can be informally acquired, such as language competencies or machine operations, during the migration, despite the evident utility of tacit knowledge in facilitating migration, job placements, and the selection of subsequent destinations.

The traditional division of knowledge into explicit and tacit forms prompts an analogous, arbitrary distinction between high- and low-skilled migrants, obscuring the rich diversity among the latter who acquire varied knowledge blends during migration. Amidst the knowledge spectrum lie four types: encultured, embedded, embodied (subtypes of tacit knowledge), and engrained knowledge, akin to explicit knowledge (Blackler, 1995; Kortendiek, 2021). As encultured knowledge which covers social and cultural norms, embedded knowledge which entails context-specific information such as routines and roles, and embodied knowledge which features implicit problem-solving intuition and self-confidence (Blackler, 1995) usually unfold naturally during the migration, they can easily be acquired, frequently unconsciously, by migrants. Thus, the "low-skilled" label overlooks the significant variance among migrants due to their possession of different knowledge combinations, especially tacit knowledge, impacting their job and destination choices.

Traditional perspectives view migration as a self-selection process, where tangible attributes like age, gender, and educational level, alongside intangible qualities such as resilience, ambition, and work ethic, collectively influence the destinations and occupations migrants pursue. These choices, in turn, lead to variances in socially stratifying life facets like health, educational attainment, and labor market outcomes (Feliciano, 2020; Kanbur & Rapoport, 2005; Portes, 2007). However, migrants' knowledge acquisition is shaped through a nuanced interplay among their pre-migratory socio-demographic traits, the socio-economic connections between origin and destination locales (e.g., migration ease, cultural and geographic proximity, migrant communities presence), and destination conditions like income distribution levels, apprehension and deportation risks, law enforcement presence, and favorable migration policies. Migrants, bearing diverse pre-migratory socio-demographic attributes,

are drawn to varying jobs across different destinations, each offering a unique blend of explicit and tacit knowledge.

Though typically relegated to so-called low-skilled jobs due to formal education barriers, low-skilled migrants often seek employment that maximizes tacit knowledge acquisition. This strategy aims to counterbalance their lack of formal education access, alleviate associated disadvantages, and broaden their career horizons with more transferable skills (Farashah et al., 2022; Hagan et al., 2011). Migrants with lesser skills or formal educational attainment are found to be more prone to working and traveling without legal documentation (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Hagan et al., 2018; Liu-Farrer et al., 2021), possibly leading to tacit knowledge accumulation through unauthorized employment channels. Armed with newfound tacit knowledge—encompassing understanding of local cultural and social norms, job roles, and problem-solving abilities—they may be better positioned to secure higher-paying jobs in more economically developed regions in labor shortages, even in the absence of work authorization. The presence of the migration infrastructure, usually unlawful, which connects China's borderlands and coastal areas facilitates their stepwise migration with significantly lowered, but not without, risks.

This study introduces an analytical framework to elucidate the nexus between migration and knowledge acquisition. Initially, we bifurcate the places of origin in Vietnam into two domains: the northern borderlands and central and southern Vietnam. From these regions, migrants are segregated into three socio-demographic groups—upper class, middle class, and under class—based on their pre-migratory attributes. Subsequently, an interplay between the conditions of origin places and pre-migratory socio-demographic attributes collectively influences their initial destination and sectoral job preferences. Following this, the knowledge procured from employment in their initial destinations guides them along varied migratory paths towards subsequent destinations. Lastly, this study emphasizes the socio-cultural linkages among the places of origin, initial destinations, and future destinations, delineating a comprehensive narrative of their migratory trajectories (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

Research methods

Site selection

Our case study scrutinizes low-skilled Vietnamese workers in two Chinese provinces: Guangxi, bordering Vietnam, and Guangdong, situated to the east of Guangxi but not adjoining Vietnam. Both provinces currently host a significant population of Vietnamese workers. Despite their geographical proximity fostering cultural similarities, their economic landscapes are notably disparate; Guangxi's economy ranks among China's lowest

Fig. 1 The analytical framework of knowledge-driven migration

Fig. 2 The map of South China and Vietnam (This map is sourced from China's Ministry of Natural Resources. The red dots are our field sites. The darker brown area indicates northern Vietnam, the lighter brown area indicates central and southern Vietnam, the darker green area is Guangxi, and the lighter green area is Guangdong)

in GDP per capita, while Guangdong enjoys economic affluence, partially attributed to its progressive and politically adaptable governance.

Guangdong's significance in this research stems from its economic dynamism and distinct socio-cultural environment compared to Guangxi. Being a powerhouse of economic activity, Guangdong presents a contrasting backdrop to explore the employment experiences and knowledge acquisition of Vietnamese migrants. Unlike Guangxi, which leverages shared ethnicity, language, and cultural norms with Vietnamese migrants for economic growth (Qin et al., 2013; Qin, 2017), Guangdong lacks a sizable ethnic community with ties to Vietnam. This absence of ethnic kinship potentially alters the
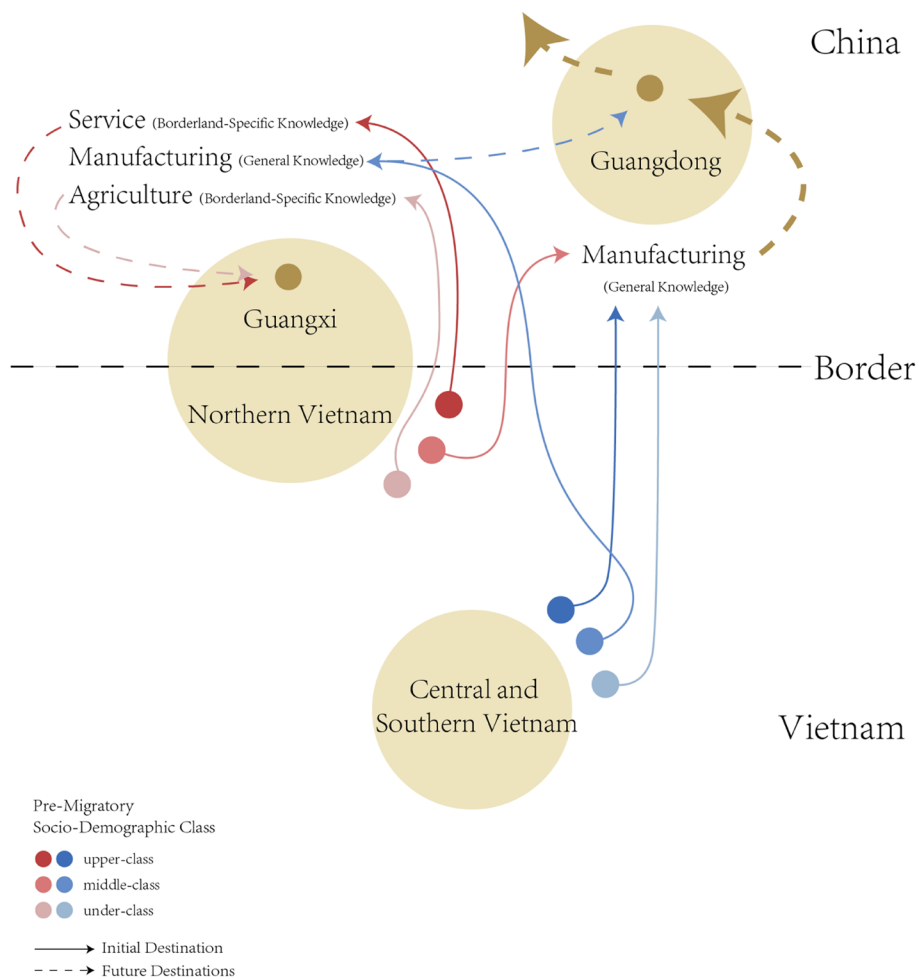
Fig. 3 The trajectories of Vietnamese migrant workers in South China

dynamics of Vietnamese migrants' integration, employment opportunities, and knowledge gain in Guangdong, thereby enriching our understanding of how differing regional contexts within China impact the migrant experience. The comparison between these two provinces thus provides nuanced insights into the interplay of regional economic prosperity, cultural affinity, and the employment trajectory of low-skilled Vietnamese migrants in China.

Data collection and analysis

Firstly, utilizing a purposive sampling method, we selected two out of three border cities in Guangxi where Chinese employers are authorized to hire Vietnamese migrants, chiefly due to China's stringent border regulations. Similarly, five Guangdong cities with economies inclined to the manufacturing sector were chosen.

Secondly, we executed face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews in both provinces via the purposive sampling method to garner a comprehensive understanding of Vietnamese labor migration in South China. Prior to using the sampling technique, initial contact with potential participants was established through

community leaders, local NGOs, and labor recruitment agencies, alongside leveraging social networks. In Guangxi cities, 17 Vietnamese workers and 30 Chinese locals were interviewed, encompassing a range of occupations and roles including sugarcane cutter, warehouse keeper, redwood factory worker, fruit vendor, interpreter, local bureaucrat, labor agent, recruitment manager, business owners, and ordinary resident. Contrarily, in Guangdong, where migrant employment is prohibited, we interviewed 14 immigration enforcement officers, 11 unauthorized Vietnamese workers employed across five selected cities, and four employers who recruited Vietnamese workers owing to escalating labor shortages (Wang et al., 2018).

During our extensive field trips, we observed a variety of workplaces and social reproduction spaces, such as dormitories, educational institutions, community centers, and public parks, alongside other locales pivotal to migration processes, such as labor recruitment agencies and borderland areas between the two nations. Noteworthy was our visit to a detention center housing undocumented Vietnamese during removal proceedings. Addressing our positionality as researchers—our cultural, academic, and personal backgrounds in relation to the study—was paramount for ensuring the authenticity and reliability of our data. To effectively bridge cultural and linguistic divides, we collaborated with interpreters who were not merely fluent in the local language but deeply familiar with regional dialects and cultural nuances. For example, during interviews in the border, our interpreter, who was born and raised in the area, helped decode local expressions to ensure that our data collection accurately reflected participants' intentions and meanings, preserving the authenticity of their voices. Employing interpreters also facilitated our engagement with hidden populations, enhancing the snowball sampling method utilized. We also took deliberate steps to construct an environment where participants felt safe to share openly, understanding that the presence of researchers might influence their responses. This was achieved by conducting interviews in familiar settings to participants, which might feel less intimidating. We also assured confidentiality through various methods to build a rapport based on trust.

Thirdly, socio-demographic data pertinent to migrants' tacit knowledge gain was gathered through a structured survey, executed in two waves across the five Guangdong cities, engaging over 1,000 migrant workers. The questions within our conversations and questionnaires were meticulously aligned with our conceptual model and analytical framework, probing into migrants' experiences, employment trajectories, and knowledge acquisition in accordance with their socio-demographic attributes and the socio-economic conditions of the regions. This alignment, validated through pilot testing and iterative refinements, ensured the internal validity of our study, enabling an accurate reflection of the constructs and relationships posited in our framework through the data collected. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, thwarted our survey execution in Guangxi cities due to border closures and entry denials to migrant workers. Nonetheless, the amassed qualitative and quantitative data from both regions, supplemented by secondary sources like cross-border labor management policies, yearbook statistics, oral histories, and corporate recruitment data, furnished a substantial dataset to scrutinize the employment of Vietnamese workers in China.

Diverging contexts of sending and receiving societies

Vietnam is a developing nation with a considerable segment of under-educated citizens, which is experiencing a demographic shift with 65% of its populace being of working age. Despite a significant portion engaged in agriculture, an observable transition towards the manufacturing and service sectors is taking place. However, these sectors are yet to provide enough wage job opportunities, propelling many young Vietnamese into self-employment or precarious jobs, which underscores a ready workforce willing to explore any job avenue for sustain livelihoods (Nyugen, 2008). Historically, post the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Vietnam commercialized its labor migration industry in the 1990s, forging pathways for its citizens to migrate to ASEAN countries and subsequently to various destinations across East Asia, the Middle East, North America, Oceania, and Europe (Tran & Crinis, 2018). The evolving economic dynamics, coupled with relatively lower travel costs and higher wage prospects in East Asian nations like South Korea, Japan, and a burgeoning China, rendered these destinations attractive to Vietnamese migrants (Nguyen, 2014).

On the receiving end, China, especially the provinces of Guangxi and Guangdong, presents a spectrum of opportunities and challenges for Vietnamese migrants. The détente in China-Vietnam relations since the early 1990s notably enhanced cross-border mobility, stimulating a plethora of cross-border activities including trade, employment, and cultural exchanges, significantly in the border cities of Guangxi. Despite these prospects, Guangxi, being one of the economically lagging provinces in China, didn't present an ideal economic haven for Vietnamese migrants. The "cross-border labor" policy trial in 2017 in Guangxi aimed at harnessing the Vietnamese labor force did not yield the anticipated outcomes, partly as the result of their stepwise migration to more economically promising locales like Guangdong.

Conversely, Guangdong, globally acknowledged as a manufacturing powerhouse, presents a stark contrast to Guangxi, offering a myriad of employment opportunities in its thriving industrial sector. For decades, Guangdong has magnetized a colossal influx of domestic migrant labor, catering to its expansive manufacturing domain. However, the escalating labor costs driven by a surge in local wage rates propelled many small and medium enterprises in Guangdong to eye cheaper labor alternatives. Vietnamese migrants, known for their willingness to undertake so-called "3D" jobs (dangerous, dirty, difficult), emerged as a viable solution to the escalating labor costs.

The "lucrative" employment prospects in Guangdong, coupled with the highly commercialized labor migration industry in Vietnam, have redirected a growing portion of Vietnamese migrant influx from borderlands to more diversified and economically promising destinations within China, especially Guangdong. Studies estimate the total number of unauthorized Southeast Asian workers is above 50,000 in Guangdong alone. This trend underscores a dynamic shift in the migratory patterns, fueled by the interplay of economic incentives and the institutional migration frameworks in both the receiving and sending societies. However, such explanation centered on the traditional pull-push narrative oversimplifies the complexity of trajectories of Vietnamese migrants in China, which are shaped by the economic, policy, societal, as well as knowledge drivers to be thoroughly explored.

Comparative socio-economic dynamics between Vietnamese origins and Chinese destinations

Our analysis illuminates the socio-economic connections among the places of origin, initial destinations, and future destinations. In this study, we categorize the places of origin in Vietnam into two distinct regions: the northern borderlands and the central and southern parts of Vietnam. Northern Vietnam shares an extensive 1,500-km border with China's Guangxi Province. Within this Guangxi-Vietnam borderland, individuals from both countries often share a common ethnicity, leading to a myriad of joint cross-border economic activities in various sectors, as both countries encourage border development. Consequently, the border residents from both countries accumulate a significant amount of knowledge specifically tailored to this shared geographic and cultural space. China has also explored cross-border labor migration policies in this region by extending border passes to interested Vietnamese migrants.

In contrast, central and southern Vietnam do not share a border with any part of China, resulting in a lack of grassroots socio-cultural linkages between these regions. The individuals from these regions do not share common ethnic ties and lack personal business engagements with each other. Migrants from central and southern Vietnam possess no predetermined preferences for a particular locale in China; their primary concern centers around the potential economic returns they may obtain. Therefore, when presented with two potential destinations, migrants from these areas, irrespective of their social classes, tend to opt for the destination offering higher remuneration, given their lack of prior knowledge about any specific region in China.

The diverging trajectories of migrants from northern Vietnam

The service jobs of the upper-class Vietnamese in the borderland

Vietnamese migrants belonging to this subgroup exhibit a marked affluence and higher educational attainment. While some are self-made, the majority hail from affluent and often politically powerful families or clans with significant local influence. This privileged background enables them access to quality education, a scarce commodity in the impoverished northern borderland. Formal education equips them with explicit skills, such as language proficiency, which proves instrumental in securing well-paying jobs in the borderland. Apart from mastering local dialects informally, they often learn Mandarin Chinese, and some even attain literacy in Chinese—a skill difficult to acquire informally. Their educational and familial backgrounds further endow them with exclusive cultural capital, granting them access to some high-demanding job opportunities. This cultural capital spans a broad spectrum, encompassing aesthetic appreciation for ethnic-styled artistic crafts, managerial prowess in marketing, branding, human resource management, and market analysis, as well as insight into the ever-evolving regulations impacting cross-border trade, underpinned by the fluctuating geopolitics between two nations concerning the South China Sea. A translator L who works for a labor agency elaborates her experiences,

> I used to study at a normal university and worked as a clerk but found it dull and the salary low. I then quit my job and, on the advice of my high school friend who was working as a translator in the borderland, joined a language school to learn

> *Chinese. Later I also worked as a translator and leverage my social network from my time in China, successfully switched jobs … In my hometown, learning Chinese and working in China is common, and being close to China, the risks are lower. I adapted to life in China and found it more vibrant.*

Given their substantial educational foundation, these migrants typically shy away from manual labor that fails to leverage their explicit knowledge. Their primary interest lies in service sector vocations such as interpreters or local artisans, and positions within the cross-border trading sector. While some find employment in redwood product processing firms or other low-end manufacturing entities, they usually occupy roles demanding explicit skills, essentially securing white-collar positions within factories.

Another Vietnamese shared her career switch from handiwork to a high-paying service job,

> *I used to move goods, and I learned my Chinese when I was doing that. With Chinese, I successfully turned into a translator. I know that with better Chinese proficiency, I could secure higher-level jobs.*

Their intimate familiarity with the borderland culture significantly enhances their employability. Numerous well-paying jobs necessitate a comprehensive understanding of the borderland's culture, ethnic relations, social norms, slangs, subtexts, table manners, matrimonial traditions, power structure, and more. An outsider, irrespective of their educational equivalence to an upper-class migrant from the northern borderland, would need to invest a considerable amount of time mastering these social rules, which hold relevance solely within the borderland. The shared borderland between Vietnam and China allows them to capitalize on economic opportunities in their hometowns, which are highly frequented tourist destinations with burgeoning economies.

Chinese employers in the service sectors exhibit a pronounced preference for candidates originating from the northern borderland. The pre-migratory knowledge base of these migrants, encapsulating both explicit and tacit knowledge, is considerably more extensive than that of other subgroups, rendering their knowledge acquisition in China relatively limited. Through their employment, upper-class Vietnamese migrants significantly enhance their Chinese language skills, both written and spoken, deepen their understanding of the Chinese legal system by navigating complex trading rules daily, and develop a keen sense of Chinese consumer preferences. However, the borderland-specific nature of their knowledge and the legal restrictions coupled with their competitiveness in comparison to Chinese candidates in other areas of China limit their employment opportunities to regions near the borderland. The legal implications of being apprehended in inland China and subsequent removal deter these migrants from venturing beyond the borderland despite potentially higher earnings. The furthest they tend to venture is Nanning, the provincial capital of Guangxi.

The agricultural jobs of the under-class Vietnamese in the borderland

The vast majority of Vietnamese in this subgroup epitomize traditional peasants with minimal formal education or are illiterate. Their modest livelihoods preclude the accumulation of sufficient capital for upward mobility within Vietnam. Predominantly experienced in agriculture, their skill set is largely non-transferable to non-agricultural

vocations requiring explicit skills. While proficient in local dialects, their lack of Mandarin Chinese proficiency hampers meaningful interactions with Chinese employers and individuals from other regions. Their extensive knowledge on the climate and soil conditions of the borderland, though valuable, finds little utility outside the agricultural domain. However, their agricultural acumen finds a lucrative market in the Guangxi borderland, which grapples with a severe labor deficit in agriculture due to China's domestic labor migration towards better economic prospects, especially in Guangdong.

Due to the expansion of cash crops like sugarcane in Guangxi, spawning auxiliary sectors within the same value chain such as sugarcane cutting, logging, logistics, and agricultural product processing, thereby fuel the demand for minimum-skilled labor from Vietnam. Due to the labor migration policies, they were able to effortlessly obtain official border passes and secure employment through local social networks. These migrants find solace in seasonal employment despite the stark wage variances between the harvest and off-seasons. For instance, a sugarcane cutter could earn up to 400 RMB daily during the harvest season, yet face unemployment in the off-season. Manager Z reflects on this labor dynamic:

> *We have many forest farms of several hundred to a thousand acres for migrant workers ... who can find jobs, all sorts of jobs such as lumberjacking, from farms which are authorized to hire migrants, or from private forest farm owners which are not ... They are very motivated to work. They are peasants from this area, just like us. They have no work to do after the dibbling, and they have no place to make money, which is hard over there (Vietnam).*

A male worker D recounts his job-seeking experience:

> *I was not hired by an electronic factory because I had no prior experience, so I had to be interviewed by a company for a fruit transportation job.*

Despite employment, earnings of these peasant-class migrants barely suffice for their living expenses. Their occupational pursuits in China mirror their jobs in Vietnam, albeit at better remunerations facilitated by cross-border migration. This migration, however, doesn't enrich them with new skills or knowledge. Much like their upper-class counterparts, their expertise remains borderland-specific, rendering it irrelevant elsewhere. The wages, although higher than what they earned in Vietnam, do not justify the legal risks associated with unauthorized ventures deep into China. A notable finding is their preference for job flexibility and proximity to home against potential earnings, which reflects in their tolerance for seasonal wage fluctuations. Their decision to stay close to the borderland is influenced by social embeddedness like familial ties, low educational attainment, lack of new skills, and fear of illegality. Manager M sheds light on this preference:

> *Vietnamese from the borderland are usually people who have families, so they look for jobs that let them return home anytime, better be on the same day, for things like a friend's banquet or housewarming party. They are authorized to work in China's borderland, so they are protected in case of accident ... Migrants who work in the borderland are more risk-averse."*

A female worker A shares her story:

> *I lived in a village in Vietnam and did farming at home. I came over to China for some sugarcane cutting work, which females could do. Because I have a kid at home, I do not want to work in Guangdong, which is in violation of the law."*

This narrative underscores the socio-economic and legal barriers that tether these Vietnamese migrants to the borderland, highlighting a complex interplay of factors that influence their migratory patterns and employment opportunities within China.

The manufacturing jobs of the middle-class Vietnamese in Guangdong

The narrative of middle-class Vietnamese migrants reflects a unique interplay between their pre-migratory socio-demographic attributes and China's employment landscape. Middle-class Vietnamese migrants, distinct from their underclass counterparts hailing from mountainous regions, predominantly reside in borderland cities or towns, with livelihoods less reliant on agricultural earnings. Unlike the upper-class migrants, they exhibit lower educational attainment and comparatively modest economic standings. This "in-betweenness" significantly influences their employment prospects. Their education renders them overqualified for agricultural roles, while the lack of requisite explicit skills, like language proficiency and trade knowledge, bars them from service sector employment. As coastal light industry factories migrate to the Guangxi borderland, seeking to leverage inexpensive Vietnamese labor, their stringent adherence to highly standardized procedures leads to a preference for compliant, quick-learning workers from central or southern Vietnamese regions, as opposed to the purportedly "troublesome" Vietnamese border residents who are seen as potential disruptor to labor stability and production consistency by employers due to their stronger social ties to the borderland societies.

Manager R notes,

> *Workers are from everywhere in Vietnam, the farthest from Ho Chi Minh City. The number of workers from the mountain areas of Vietnam is larger. More workers are members of Vietnam's ethnic minorities.*

Therefore, the factory relocations to Guangxi, though offering job opportunities to middle-class Vietnamese migrants nearby, inadvertently guide them towards China's coastal regions, addressing the escalating labor shortages there. Factories retaining their coastal locations often exhibit leniency in vetting incoming workers and overlook their credentials. Some factories oftentimes ambiguously discern between Vietnamese migrants and Chinese ethnic minority members. Factories in the coastal areas which face labor scarcities hire Vietnamese workers including those from the borderland who are now severed from social ties and presumed committed to work, given their restricted work permissions in Guangdong.

Employment in the manufacturing sector presents a realm of transferable skills. Entry-level assembly line roles demand no specific pre-requisites but foster a learning environment where migrants gain both explicit and tacit knowledge. Migrant workers are immersed into the disciplined, fast-paced, high-pressure, and performance-centric factory setting, which is unfamiliar territories given Vietnam's nascent industrialization phase. Despite being labeled low-skilled, these migrants garner a wealth of explicit and tacit knowledge encompassing machine operation, assembly line coordination, basic

quality assurance, cleanliness and maintenance, goods and materials storage, alongside the mastering of basic Chinese conversational skills. Factory owner X elucidates,

> *The length of skill learning varies. There are a lot of handy skills to be learned in a garment factory, so a worker may need a month to be ready. But in an electronic factory, in which more machineries are used, a one-week training would do."*

A female worker L shares her narrative,

> *I am from Bắc Giang. I used to work in Pingxiang with my mom (prior to the pandemic), while my elder brother worked in Hà Nội, and my dad worked in hometown. A new electronic factory opened in Bắc Giang, and I took an interview. I worked a few days, but I did not like it because that job was not good for health. I wish I could return to Pingxiang, but I do not know whether the company I worked for will want me anymore.*

Despite the low-end nature of the skills acquired in manufacturing jobs, we find that their transferability enhances the mobility of middle-class migrants, opening doors to better economic prospects both within other regions of China, such as Guangdong, and back in industrialized areas of Vietnam due to the ongoing shifting manufacturing landscape marked by factory relocation from China. The fluidity and adaptability in the employment paths of middle-class Vietnamese, and the transferable knowledge gained through work experiences are in high demand.

The diverging trajectories of migrants from central and southern Vietnam
The manufacturing jobs of the middle-class Vietnamese in the borderland
Facing the labor recruitment competition with coastal factories, to address the urgent need for diligent, industrious, and workload-resilient Vietnamese migrant workers, factories that had relocated to the Guangxi borderland initiated collaborative ventures with commercial labor brokerage entities. The objective was to broaden the recruitment horizon and penetrate regions all across Vietnam, with a particular emphasis on the remote locales nestled in the central and southern swathes of Vietnam. A strategy of lowering the thresholds of job prerequisites, such as the age limit, was deployed to entice Vietnamese migrants aged between 40 to 66, who otherwise found themselves at a competitive disadvantage against the younger workforce in the domestic job market of Vietnam. The easing of cross-border recruitment regulations played a pivotal role in facilitating this recruitment metamorphosis. Commercial labor brokers recalibrated their recruitment blueprints to align with the labor appetite of the translocated factories. For instance, given that migrant workers hailing from the northern borderland, endowed with a richer portfolio of transferable skills, could traverse to other Chinese territories with relative ease courtesy of their robust pre-existing social scaffolds, labor agents pivoted their focus towards the mountainous terrains of central and south Vietnam. The target demographic were those from ethnic minorities, perceived to be more docile due to their scant social support networks on the borderland. To retain them for longer durations, factory proprietors orchestrated provisions such as dormitories and ethnic cuisine, coupled with an orchestrated detachment from mainstream society to render them more manageable. A female worker Z shared her narrative,

> *I met a friend who came from the borderland, who referred me to work for a factory in China's borderland. Since I used to learn Chinese from my housekeeping job in Taiwan, I assisted the owner with hiring and managing Vietnamese workers.*

Labor agents invested substantial efforts to rope in middle-class migrant workers, given the operational requisites of machinery and assembly lines in the factories. The under-class migrants from these regions often bear a risk of being ensnared in human trafficking networks, while the adventurous upper-class migrants look forward to better jobs in Guangdong. Middle-class migrants, however, favored the borderland due to its benign migration expenditure, diminished legal jeopardy, lower assimilation hurdles, and the possibility of maintaining robust social affiliations. Despite the potential of acquiring a comparable blend of knowledge from manufacturing jobs as migrants from other social strata, the trajectory towards venturing elsewhere was lengthier for middle-class migrants. This was chiefly due to the extended learning curve required to grasp sufficient knowledge about China, Mandarin Chinese, and the art of navigating through the legal quagmires in restricted territories with unauthorized status. As these migrants amass a repertoire of transferable skills, a fraction of them also embarks on journeys towards Guangdong, lured by the prospects of higher economic returns. A rising tide of middle-class migrants is being discovered in Guangdong and other Chinese regions, with a notable chunk who used to have their initial employment in the borderland. Evidently, a migratory conduit seems to be connecting central and south Vietnam, the borderland, and other Chinese locales, carving a pathway for middle-class migrants in search of better economic prospects.

The manufacturing jobs of the upper- and under-class Vietnamese in Guangdong

Though segregated into two classes, upper-class and under-class Vietnamese migrants are directed to Guangdong due to the complex tapestry of socio-demographic dynamics, legal entanglements, and migratory aspirations. Guangdong has witnessed the issue of undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers since the 1990s, the influx of whom hails predominantly from the central and southern regions of Vietnam despite the prohibition against recruiting low-skilled foreign workforce. The concern has exacerbated in recent years due to a critical labor shortage in the manufacturing sector, pervading Guangdong and other parts of China. The allure of wages, triple the average wage in Vietnam, overshadows the smuggle fees of 4,500 RMB for a one-way trip, despite being slightly higher than the average monthly wage of 4,000 RMB in Guangdong as of 2022. This economic incentive fuels the unstoppable tide of migration. Yet, the clandestine nature of their legal status brews a pot of tension. Evading deportation necessitates a high degree of stamina, rapid learning capability, rigor, and a predisposition for social isolation within the migrant workers. The survey reveals a stark reality where 40% of respondents had no interactions with Chinese individuals outside their workplaces. A police officer X explains the clandestine operation of the factories in Guangdong which hire Vietnamese workers,

> *Workers are sent to unregistered factories, concealed and remote from urban centers. They are assigned to the lowest-ranked positions and relatively isolated from each other. They have very limited contacts with local Chinese.*

In this complex landscape, labor agents, designated by Guangdong employers, scout for under-class job candidates who are perceived to be obedient for the entry-level positions such as assembly workers or janitors in artificial flower and computer accessories factories. A male worker G told us about his migratory trajectory,

> *We were mostly from rural areas. People who came to China were usually those in the lower class in our village. People with some resources might do business to make money and have no need to work outside the hometown.*

Another male worker E reflects his language learning experiences in his job,

> *I did not know any Chinese at all when I first arrived … but I basically learned how to speak it in half a year, because I was the only Vietnamese in the factory, and I had to talk with colleagues in order to learn skills.*

Meanwhile, the migratory stream of the under-class Vietnamese spurs relatively highly educated individuals from these regions to spontaneously look for jobs. These individuals, predominantly young males, circumvent the traditional path and engage labor agents for direct placement in Guangdong. This maneuver results in a much lower illiteracy rate and a higher tally of college-degree holders in the Vietnamese workforce in Guangdong than Vietnamese statistics would imply.

Amidst the rigor of factory life, these migrants embark on a journey of the explicit and tacit skills acquisition, the Chinese language learning, workplace norms adaptation, and the handling of intricate physical challenges. The undocumented status necessitates a more profound grasp of new skills and knowledge, which helps them navigate through everyday hostile environments. Such skills and knowledge include mastering Mandarin Chinese, fostering ties within newly formed ethnic social networks to stay informed of police raids, policy alterations, and safe hideaways. A female factory worker A recounts her self-driven language learning journey,

> *I completed high school … and learned Chinese all by myself from Chinese colleagues … No one checked our document and we did not talk a lot … to pretend we were ethnic minority Chinese … it only took me one day to apprehend how to assemble the cellphone case … I had never been to any Vietnamese restaurant when I was out there.*

The frequent information exchange leads to the increase of their tacit knowledge, rendering stepwise migration a complex endeavor. Some migrants return to Vietnam to leverage their newly acquired knowledge gained in China's manufacturing jobs for new job opportunities presented by the factory relocation spearheaded by multinational corporations such as Samsung and Foxconn. Others opt for a retreat back to the borderland for safer manufacturing job opportunities. Their tacit knowledge garnered in Guangdong equips them with a mix of experiences, sophistication, and confidence, distinguishing them from those who remain in Guangxi. They sometimes became the leaders of collective actions by Vietnamese workers in the borderland, underscored by their affluent and diversified cross-ethnic network. A fruit vendor P's return to Guangxi is exemplar,

> *I used to work in Guangdong, but I returned to Pingxiang because the job over there was very difficult, and Guangdong is far. My fruit vendor is a congregation site for*

> *local Vietnamese people who come to buy freshly cut fruit. Although local ordinances do not allow to hire Vietnamese people for vendor, we do not worry about such violation. Roughly we make 3,000 RMB a month here.*

The intertwined narratives of upper-class and under-class Vietnamese migrants in Guangdong portrays a microcosm of global labor dynamic. Living under the fear of the potential deportation, Vietnamese migrants are driven to acquire a diverse spectrum of knowledge from their tenure in Guangdong, which further leads to diverging migratory pathways, constituting a network shaped by profit incentives of the factory executives, legal frameworks of multi-level governments, and the relentless pursuit of better future of law-breaking foreign migrants.

Discussion and conclusion

This study, by expanding the knowledge framework and scrutinizing its acquisition, furnishes a partial elucidation to the diverging trajectories of low-skilled Vietnamese migrants across China. Our findings unveil that the pre-migratory socio-demographic attributes of Vietnamese migrants, in conjunction with the conditions prevalent in their origin and destinations, collectively steer the economic sectors they initially engage in, and the spectrum of knowledge they amass therein. Furthermore, we discerned that the diversified knowledge portfolios acquired from varied jobs subsequently navigate them towards distinct future destinations. Also, we find that even low-skilled workers have the potential to accumulate tacit skills, which not only augment their economic return, but more important, crucially galvanizes the impetus for subsequent migration. Thus, this study renders a significant contributes to the broader discourse on labor migration dynamics amidst evolving regional economic landscapes.

The emergence of Vietnamese migrants in Guangdong, a province non-adjacent to Vietnam, manifests an unanticipated but inevitable repercussion of China's influential role in regional economic networks propelling Southeast Asia's economic integration. In a rapidly globalizing economy, China has reaped and stands to continually harvest the benefits emanating from regional economic integration based on robust networks of trade, investment, and human mobility. Contradictorily, as China faces a nationwide labor shortage, spurred by factors such as an aging population, difficult industrial evolution, regional development disparities, and stringent birth control policies among others, China only implemented some small-scale remedial initiatives largely confined to experimentations in borderlands like the China-Vietnam frontier, aiming to channel migrant labor towards fueling the local economies of relatively underdeveloped regions, whilst attempting to geographically confine migrants to traditional dwelling zones.

Therefore, a nuanced understanding of the dynamics steering Vietnamese workers towards Guangdong and the ensuing implications is imperative. Labor migration is an inherent phenomenon in the dynamics of global and regional economies. Our findings suggest that the influx of migrant labor becomes an indispensable factor in maintaining China's industrial productivity and economic growth and the labor migration trajectory of Vietnamese is poised for expansion, in light of the unabating causal

forces triggering immigration. The existing countermeasures, predominantly centered on suppression by local authorities, prove to be futile. The continuous expansion of labor migration across China highlights the need for pragmatic and forward-looking policies which effectively manage this enduring aspect of economic globalization.

Thus, we advocate for a paradigm shift in China's approach, one that acknowledges the inevitability of labor migration. In the immediate term, we propose that either local governmental bodies in Guangdong or the central government accord proper work authorization to Vietnamese migrants, extricating them from the shadows of illegality and curbing their engagement in unlawful transnational activities, a byproduct of China's stringent immigration doctrine. The mid-term strategic outline should entail incentivizing a broader spectrum of corporations via platforms like the Belt and Road Initiative and other geo-economic frameworks to channel investments into Vietnam and neighboring nations. This strategy capitalizes on the affordable labor reservoirs, thereby grounding the migrant populace. Concurrently, the enforcement of stringent legal measures against nefarious activities such as sex trafficking remains paramount, ensuring public security and laying a robust foundation for the evolution of China's immigration policy framework.

Availability of data and materials

Data sharing is not applicable to this article due to the sensitive nature of the data.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

References

Baláž, V., Williams, A. M., Moravčíková, K., & Chrančoková, M. (2021). What competence, which migrants? Tacit and explicit knowledge acquired via migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 47*(8), 1758–1774.

Blackler, F. (1995). Knowledge, knowledge work and organizations: an overview and interpretation. *Organization Studies, 16*(6), 1021–1046.

Chiswick, B., & Miller, P. (2009). Citizenship in the United States: the roles of immigrant characteristics and country of origin. In A. F. Constant, K. Tatsiramos, & K. F. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Labor Market Outcomes* (pp. 91–130). Emerald Publishing.

Dai, H. (戴宏军) & Wei, F. (韦福安) (2013). The causes of inflow of regular Vietnamese workers in China and countermeasures. *Open newspaper* (开放导报), *24*(5), 48–51.

Duan, Y. (段颖) (2018). Transnational mobility, cross border business and flexible citizenship: a study of identification and livelihood of Burmese Chinese in China-Myanmar border are (跨国流动、商贸往来与灵活公民身份——边境地区缅甸华人生存策略与认同建构之研究). *Qinghai Journal of Ethnology* (青海民族研究), *29*(1), 7-12.

Farashah, A., & Blomquist, T. (2022). Work experiences of qualified immigrants: a review of theoretical progress. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, 41*(7), 1063–1090.

Feliciano, C. (2020). Immigrant selectivity effects on health, labor market, and educational outcomes. *Annual Review of Sociology, 46*(1), 315–334.

Grabowska, I., & Jastrzebowska, A. (2022). *Migration and the transfer of informal human capital: insights from Central Europe and Mexico*. Routledge.

Hagan, J., Demonsant, J. L., & Chávez, S. (2018). Identifying and measuring the lifelong human Capital of 'Unskilled' migrants in the Mexico-US migratory circuit. *Journal on Migration and Human Security, 2*(2), 76–100.

Hagan, J., Lowe, N., & Quingla, C. (2011). Skills on the move: rethinking the relationship between human capital and immigrant economic mobility. *Work and Occupations, 38*(2), 149–178.

Hercog, M., & Cangià, F. (2021). Skills on the move: highly skilled migrants in Switzerland and beyond. *Population, Space and Place, 27*(5), e2457.

Howells, J. (2000). Knowledge, Innovation and Location. In J. R. Bryson, P. W. Daniels, N. Henry, & J. Pollard (Eds.), *Knowledge, Space, Economy* (pp. 50–62). Routeledge.

Hsieh, S., Lin, J., & Lee, H. (2012). Analysis on literature review of competency. *International Review of Business and Economics, 2*, 25–50.

Huynh, H., & Vo, D. (2023). The effects of migration on unemployment: new evidence from the Asian Countries. *Sustainability, 15*(14), 11385.

Jephcote, C., Williams, A., Li, G., & Janta, H. (2023). Return migration and employment mobility: a pan-European analysis. *Journa of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 49*(17), 4435–4459.

Kanbur, R., & Rapoport, H. (2005). Migration selectivity and the evolution of spatial inequality. *Journal of Economic Geography, 5*(1), 43–57.

Kortendiek, N. (2021). How to govern mixed migration in Europe: transnational expert networks and knowledge creation in international organizations. *Global Networks, 21*(2), 320–338.

Kureková, L., & Žilinčíková, Z. (2023). Examining labor market hierarchies in Slovakia from the perspective of intra-EU migration and return. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 49*(16), 4140–4168.

Liang, Y. (梁玉成), & Li, M. (李蔓莉) (2019). Estimation of the population size of undocumented foreign workers in B Province of China—A localization attempt of immigration sociology (在华B省非法外籍劳工人口规模的测算——一项移民社会学的本土化尝试). *Sociological Review of China* (社会学评论), *7*(6), 31-48.

Liu-Farrer, G., Yeoh, B., & Bass, M. (2021). Social construction of skill: an analytical approach toward the question of skill in cross-border labor mobilities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 47*(10), 2237–2251.

Lulle, A., Janta, H., & Emilsson, H. (2021). Introduction to the Special Issue: European youth migration: human capital outcomes, skills and competences. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 47*(8), 1725–1739.

Moroşanu, L., King, R., Lulle, A., & Pratsinakis, M. (2021). 'One improves here every day': the occupational and learning journeys of 'lower-skilled' European migrants in the London region. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 47*(8), 1775–1792.

Nguyen, A. D. (2008). *Labour Migration from Vietnam Issues of Policy and Practice*. International Labour Organization.

Nguyen, C. H. (2014). Development and brain drain: a review of Vietnamese labour export and skilled migration. *Migration and Development, 3*(2), 181–202.

Nonaka, I., & Krogh, G. V. (2009). Perspective—Tacit knowledge and knowledge conversion: controversy and advancement in organizational knowledge creation theory. *Organization Science, 20*(3), 635–652.

Paul, A. M. (2011). Stepwise international migration: a multistage migration pattern for the aspiring migrant. *American Journal of Sociology, 116*(6), 1842–1886.

Portes, A. (2007). Migration, development, and segmented assimilation: a conceptual review of the evidence. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 610*(1), 73–97.

Qin, H. (秦增), Chen, J. (陈劲波), & Wei, Y. (韦艳丹) (2013). Cultural integration and cooperation: research on the Vietnamese workers in D City, Guangxi, China (文化相融与合作共享——基于中国广西D市越南籍散工的讨论). *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities: Philosophy and Social Science Edition* (广西民族大学学报(哲学社会科学版)), *35*(2), 111–116.

Qin, H. (秦红增) (2017). The Approaches to the urbanization of Sino-Vietnamese port-towns (中越边境口岸型城镇化路径探析). *Journal of Yunnan Normal University: Humanities and Social Sciences Edition* (云南师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版)), *49*(3), 47-54.

Segersven, O., Arminen, I., & Simonen, M. (2023). Acculturation among finnish somalis: an imitation game inquiry into bicultural fluency. *International Migration Review*. https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231154555

Tran, A., & Crinis, V. (2018). Migrant labor and state power: Vietnamese workers in Malaysia and Vietnam. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies, 13*(2), 27–73.

Wang, J. (汪建华), Fan, L. (范璐璐) & Zhang, S. (张书琬) (2018). The regional differences of industrialization model and migrant workers' Characteristics based on the comparison between Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta (工业化模式与农民工问题的区域差异——基于珠三角与长三角地区的比较研究). *Sociological Studies* (社会学研究), *33*(4), 109–36+244.

Wang, Y. (王越平) & Yang, T. (杨天) (2020). Embedding differentiation: the spatial features of foreign workers in the southwestern borderland of China (差异性嵌入:中国西南边境地区外籍务工人员的空间特征研究). *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities: Philosophy and Social Science edition* (广西民族大学学报(哲学社会科学版)), *42*(3), 78–83.

Williams, A. M., & Baláž, V. (2005). What human capital, which migrants? Returned skilled migration to Slovakia from the UK. *International Migration Review, 39*(2), 439–468.

Publisher's Note