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A Glimpse into the Minds of Thais: Unveiling the Factors Influencing Thai Local Attitudes towards Myanmar Refugees

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Abstract

The attitudes of refugee-hosting populations towards conflict-induced refugees are an important factor to consider when attempting to create an accepting and welcoming environment for refugees. Previous studies on this topic have primarily been conducted in the Global North context, leaving a gap in research in the Global South, especially in Southeast Asia. This study bridges this gap by examining the factors influencing the attitudes of a refugee-hosting population in Chiang Mai province, Thailand toward refugees from Myanmar. Results by a logit model identified the significant factors determining attitudes as age, ethnicity, income, occupation, and total years of contact with the refugees. Even without legal recognition from the government, these factors continue to play a crucial role in shaping Thai local attitudes, particularly in regard to government policies on refugee management, life security/safety, and employment opportunities. When formulating refugee integration plans, these influences must be taken into account.

Keywords: *Determinants; local attitudes; refugees; refugee-hosting population; Myanmar*

Introduction

The number of studies on the factors influencing inter-group attitudes between refugees and refugee-hosting populations has been growing in recent years, largely due to the fact that understanding these factors could help build welcoming environments for refugees integrating into host society (Betts et al., 2023; World Bank, 2017). However, most of them were conducted in the context of the global north i.e. Europe and North America and provide little insight into how people living in developing countries feel about refugees, particularly in the global south and southeast Asia (Betts et al., 2023; Dempster et al., 2020).

The need to study the southeast Asian contexts specifically is very important, as many southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, have not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, meaning that they do not have a formal asylum system to manage refugees and do not officially recognize refugee status (Pechdin & Ahmad, 2023). Therefore, the inter-group attitudes in these countries may have influencing factors different from those in the global north, where the 1951 Refugee Convention is largely in effect. To fill this gap, we conducted an in-depth investigation of Thailand's refugee-hosting community which could provide a more diverse range of perspectives on the factors influencing interactions between the hosting population and refugees. These insights will support policymakers in Thailand, other southeast Asian countries, and other countries with similar contexts in recognizing potential factors influencing the attitudes of the local population when they come to host refugees with

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lack of legal recognition, and ultimately policymakers can develop plans to create a more welcoming environment for them and promote their social inclusion.

Profile of Study Area

This study was conducted at the Koung Jor refugee camp, in Piang Luang sub-district, Wiang Haeng district, Chiang Mai province of northern Thailand, adjacent to the southern Shan state of Myanmar. This refugee camp was formed in 2002 due to intense conflicts in the early 2000s when the civil conflicts between ethnic groups in the Shan State and Burma military started being severe (Pechdin & Ahmad, 2022). The refugees in this camp are recognized as ‘temporary residents’ by Thai government, simply because Thailand is not a signatory member of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Therefore, these refugees don’t have legal recognitions from the Thai government. Currently, the camp accommodates approximately 400 refugees (Hein, 2018), and those residents have relied on local supports.

In the context of the hosting community, Piang Luang sub-district, it is located approximately 151 kilometers from the capital of Chiang Mai province whose economy is dominated by the agricultural sector. Local demography majority is of Tai ethnicity, which is related to most residents of the Koung Jor refugee camp. During the early arrivals of the refugees in 2002, some of the locals had negative attitudes regarding refugees from the Shan state owing to worries about life safety and economic activity, but these attitudes have since improved as the refugees have assimilated and become more integrated into the community in later years (The Shan Women's Action Network, 2003).

Factors influencing attitudes of refugee-hosting populations

The studies on the factors influencing the attitudes of refugee-hosting communities have been inconclusive. There was no definitive answer to what key factors uprightly influence local attitudes, as experiences and perceptions varied significantly from one person to another. However, there has been some evidence that demographic profiles such as gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, income, and a length of time contact with a refugee may all play a role in determining whether an individual is more or less likely to accept refugees (Betts et al., 2023; Glen et al., 2020; Knappert et al., 2021).

In regards to genders, some studies suggested that women were generally more supportive of refugees than men (Betts et al., 2023). Although the reasons for this are not fully understood, it is possible that women are more likely to empathize with the plight of refugees, given that they are often the victims of violence and conflict (Betts et al., 2023). Ages of the host residents could also be a major factor as younger people were found to be more likely to accept refugees than older generations, perhaps because they are less set in their ways (De Coninck et al., 2021; Glen et al., 2020; Wike et al., 2016). In addition, some studies suggested that people across age, education and income background were more likely to accept refugees from a similar ethnicity (Martén et al., 2019) probably because they feel a sense of shared identity and commonality (Halabi & Nadler, 2017). Furthermore, existing studies address that people who work in farming and agriculture are generally more accepting of refugees than those in other occupations (Rengs et al., 2017). One possible explanation was that refugees are often willing to work for lower wages than locals, which can help farmers to reduce labor costs (İçduygu & Diker, 2017). Moreover, some evidence pointed that people on lower incomes are more likely to accept of refugees than those on higher incomes (Lipka, 2022)

which can be explained as they have also experienced hardships in their own lives (Pawlicka et al., 2019). However, some of the more common reasons cited have addressed hostile attitude of poor locals towards refugees, especially when they perceived impact that refugees may have on local economies, such as through increased competition for jobs (Ritchie, 2018). Finally, longer contact time between the hosts and the refugees could foster positive attitudes of understanding and empathy when locals understand the needs and struggles of a refugee (Esses et al., 2017). While contact time can be induce positive outputs, there has been also been reports that local residents may have hostile attitudes if they experienced negative refugee-related experiences during refugee recognition (Knappert et al., 2021).

Methodology

In this study, three key perspectives of the attitudes were considered, based on the results of (Betts et al., 2023; World Bank, 2017):

- (1) Government authorities on refugee management
- (2) Concerns on life security/safety
- (3) Employment opportunity

Data were collected through face-to-face questionnaire surveys conducted in Piang Luang sub-district. Three experts were consulted to verify the quality of the questionnaire using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) method (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1976), and the questions were then improved based on their feedback. The reliability of the questionnaire was further tested by pilot survey (5 participants) and met the criteria of Cronbach's alpha method (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

The study participants were recruited by simple random sampling. The inclusion criteria for the study participants were : (a) having contact with the Koung Jor refugee camp for at least five years, (b) having minimum age of 18 years old, and (c) having participation(s) with activities associated with Koung Jor refugee camp regularly and continuously. The authors strictly followed ethical standards and received ethical certification no. RERC 2021/013 from the Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) in authors' affiliated institutions.

Variables

In terms of dependent variables, the three perspectives of the local attitudes (ATT) were identified as:

- (1) Government authorities on refugee management: it was addressed by the question, "Do you think that the refugees are treated by the Thai government fairly as compared to Thai nationals (ATT₁)."
- (2) Concerns on life security/safety: it was addressed by the question, "Do you think that local people have concerns about life security/safety from the refugee (ATT₂)."
- (3) Employment opportunity: it was addressed by the question "Do you think local people think those refugees should have job opportunities similar to Thai National (ATT₃),

and were denoted by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (level 1) to Strongly Agree (level 5). The scale was then recategorized into a dichotomous variable by defining levels 1-2 to represent disagreeing context (ATT=0) and levels 3-5 to represent non-

disagreeing context (ATT=1). This recategorization allowed the authors to gain insights into the relationship between two binary outcomes which helped predicting the probability of an event occurring more clearly.

Regarding our review, we incorporated six independent predictors of the attitudes of local communities into our investigation, categorized into three analytical groups. They were dichotomous variables: gender (GDR), occupation (OCC), and total years of contact with the refugees (YOC); categorical variables: ethnicity (ETH) and monthly income of respondent (INC); and numerical variables: age (AGE).

Empirical Model

Upon considering the specific characteristics of the dependent variables, namely, the attitudes of local citizens, the Logit Regression model (logit) was adopted (Cramer, 2003). The model was fundamentally used for analyzing the dichotomous variable. It attempted to estimate the probability of being one category compared to another. The estimation method was denoted as follows:

$$P(ATT_{i,j} = 1) = \frac{e^{\beta_i X_i}}{\sum_{i=1}^k e^{\beta_i X_i}} \quad (1)$$

and

$$X_i = \alpha_0 + \beta_2 GDR_i + \beta_1 AGE_i + \beta_3 ETH_i + \beta_4 OCC_i + \beta_5 INC_i + \beta_6 YOC_i$$

where $ATT_{i,j}$ was individual attitude j ($ATT_{1..3}$) of the local respondent i . $P(ATT=1)$ was the probability that the individual respondent had a non-negative attitude j towards the refugee community. X was defined as a set of local attitude determinants that consist of the gender (GDR), age (AGE), ethnicity (ETH), occupation (OCC), monthly income of respondent (INC), total years of contact with the refugees (YOC) and β, α was a set of coefficients.

According to Equation (1), the probability of a local individual posing a non-negative attitude towards the refugees $P(ATT=1)$ was quantified by β in the set of predictors X . The marginal effect was used to interpret the meaning of β , indicating as the following equations:

$$\text{Marginal Effect: } \frac{\partial \hat{P}}{\partial X} = \hat{\beta}_x \hat{P}(1 - \hat{P}) \quad (2)$$

As indicated in Equation 2, the partial derivative of probability $P(ATT=1)$ with respect to X yielded the marginal effect. If the marginal effect had a positive sign; when the predictor or independent variable increased by one unit, it increased the probability of agreeing on context (success event). On the other hand, with the negative sign, when the predictor or independent variable increased by one unit, it decreased the probability of disagreeing context (failure event). In term of a dichotomous variable, as well as categorical variables, its coefficient can be interpreted by comparing each category over a based category. For example, considering to β_{GDR} by giving male as a based category, when β was less than 0 ($\beta < 0$), which meant that the marginal effect contributed by a female was less than that of a male, it could indicate that changing from male to female reduces $P(ATT=1)$ be by $(1 - \beta) \times 100\%$.

Results

Considering the budget and labour availability of the survey, 198 representatives out of a total of 2,448 households who met the criteria were observed. The confidence level was calculated based on the formula developed by (Yamane, 1967). Accordingly, the confidence level of the sampling design was 93% (or at a significant level of 0.07).

Data were collected from 198 individuals: 89 males (45%) and 109 females (55%) (Table 1), the majority of which were over 40 years old. In terms of ethnicity, the plurality of our respondents were of Tai people, a closely related group to Myanmar population and worked in agricultural field. A simple majority of the respondents earned 5000-9,999 THB/Month (51%). Lastly, most of those who participated in this research, 152 people (77%), had been in contact with the refugees for more than ten years.

Table 1. summary of characteristics of the respondents

| Respondents Characteristics | N | Percentage |
|---|----------|-------------------|
| <i>Total Respondents</i> | 198 | |
| <i>Gender</i> | | |
| Male | 89 | 45% |
| Female | 109 | 55% |
| <i>Age</i> | | |
| 18-30 | 16 | 8% |
| 31-45 | 31 | 16% |
| 46-60 | 80 | 40% |
| 61-70 | 44 | 22% |
| Over 70 years old | 27 | 14% |
| <i>Ethnicity</i> | | |
| Tai (Shan) | 92 | 46% |
| Thai | 78 | 39% |
| Chinese | 28 | 14% |
| <i>Occupation</i> | | |
| Farmer | 116 | 59% |
| Non-Farmer | 82 | 41% |
| <i>Total Income</i> | | |
| Lower than 5,000 THB (150 USD) /Month | 73 | 37% |
| 5,000-9,999 THB (151-330 USD) /Month | 100 | 51% |
| Over 10,000 THB (330 USD) /Month | 25 | 13% |
| <i>Total Years of Contact with the Refugees</i> | | |
| Less than 5 years | | |
| 5-10 Years | 46 | 23% |
| Over 10 Years | 152 | 77% |

Source: Collected and Calculated by authors

Empirical Results

There were significant findings based on on age, occupation, income level, and total years of contact with the refugees. However, unexpectedly, male and female respondents offered highly similar responses and therefore, there was no significant difference between gender groups towards refugee management, life security, and employment opportunities.

Table 2. Summarizes empirical results of local attitudes towards the refugees

| Variable | Attitude of local community | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|---------|------------------|---------|------------------|---------|
| | ATT ₁ | | ATT ₂ | | ATT ₃ | |
| | mf _x | p-value | mf _x | p-Value | mf _x | p-Value |
| <i>Gender</i> | | | | | | |
| Male | -0.121 | 0.102 | 0.003 | 0.968 | 0.035 | 0.442 |
| Female (based) | | | | | | |
| <i>Age</i> | 0.003 | 0.241 | 0.009 | 0.004* | 0.001 | 0.691 |
| <i>Ethnicity</i> | | | | | | |
| Thai | -0.248 | 0.002** | 0.028 | 0.735 | -0.268 | 0.000** |
| Chinese | -0.246 | 0.051** | 0.179 | 0.098 | -0.395 | 0.002** |
| Tai (Shan) (based) | | | | | | |
| <i>Occupation</i> | | | | | | |
| Farmer | 0.057 | 0.452 | -0.198 | 0.008** | 0.023 | 0.639 |
| Non-Farmer (based) | | | | | | |
| <i>Total Income</i> | | | | | | |
| Lower than 5,000 THB (150 USD) /Month | -0.732 | 0.000** | -0.229 | 0.077* | -0.037 | 0.620 |
| 5,000-9,999 THB (151-330 USD) /Month | -0.610 | -0.617 | -0.088 | 0.503 | -0.154 | 0.046** |
| Over 10,000 THB (330 USD) /Month (Based) | | | | | | |
| <i>Total years of contact with the Refugees</i> | | | | | | |
| 5-10 Years (based) | | | | | | |
| Over 10 Years | -0.066 | 0.508** | -0.259 | 0.004** | -0.133 | 0.002** |
| Pseudo R2 | | 0.145 | | 0.084 | | 0.151 |
| Prob > chi2 | | 0.000 | | 0.003 | | 0.000 |

Remark: (1) mf_x=marginal effect (2) * refers to a significance at level 0.10, and ** refers to a significance at level 0.05.

Source: Calculated by authors based on the surveyed data

In terms of age, the significance level was at 0.10 in security issues. When people age, it was more likely that they will have increased their little concerns over life safety towards the refugees (mf_x=0.004). This might infer that younger residents in this community were more open to the refugees when taking security issues into consideration.

For ethnicity, it significantly influenced the attitudes of government management (ATT₁) and employment opportunities (ATT₃) at significant level of 0.05. As compared to the Tai ethnicity, the significantly negative sign indicated that Thai and Chinese ethnicity were associated with the odds of thinking that the refugees were not treated fairly by the Thai government (mf_x<0). In terms of employment opportunities, Tai respondents being more likely to think that refugees should have job opportunities similar to Thai nationals than the other two groups (mf_x<0).

In addition, there were significant findings of occupation towards security issues (ATT₂). The study found occupation was significant effects on people's level of concerns. Farmer respondents were significantly less likely to be concerned about life security and safety from refugees (mf_x<0). It was partly due to the fact that the farmers in this area were often in need of additional labor to help with tasks like harvesting, weeding, and other agricultural work. This close activities would lessen their security concerns towards the refugees.

Moreover, this study found that the total income of the respondents also had a significant impact for all attitudes. Those earning less than 5,000 THB per month were more likely to have positive attitudes toward refugees regarding refugee management (ATT₁) and employment opportunities (ATT₂). This might be contributed by the fact that the lower-income locals may simply be more exposed to stories of refugees and their struggles, which can lead to a greater understanding and empathy for the refugee situations. Meanwhile, those earning 5,000-9,999 THB per month were being less likely to think that refugees should have employment opportunities (ATT₃) similar to Thai nationals. This was because locals earning between 5,000 and 9,999 THB comprised a significant portion of the labor market in this community. If refugees were given the same opportunity, there could be more competition in the labor market.

Lastly, the study found that those who had contacted with refugees for over 10 years were a significant predictor of all attitudes. In terms of government management (ATT₁), locals with longer contact with the refugees were more willing urge the government to improve supports to the refugees (mfx<0). Furthermore, these people also perceived safe towards the existence of refugees in their community (mfx<0). It implied that for a longer of time, these refugees have not contributed security issues to this local communities. However, these people have had slightly negative attitudes when it came to employment issues. They were less likely to think that the refugees should have job opportunities similar to Thai nationals when comparing to those contacting with refugees for over 5-10 years. This implied that people with a longer contact with refugees may have unfavorable experiences about employment opportunities with refugees, deterring them from supporting the promotion of employment opportunities for refugees.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to our key findings from the logit regression, individuals' local attitudes towards refugees with lack of legal recognition were frequently correlated with age, ethnicity, income, occupation, and length of contact with the refugees. In terms of age, when attitudes came to concerns about life security, the findings found that when age increased, the negative attitude also increased, similar to findings from previously published studies (e.g. Glen et al., 2020; Wike et al., 2016). It can be explained that younger people were more socially accepting and had not experienced the same personal or cultural connections with refugees as older people (Glen et al., 2020). Moreover, younger people were typically more open to refugees because they were more likely to have been exposed to diverse cultural backgrounds and ideas, and to have more positive attitudes towards different cultures (De Coninck et al., 2021). As a result, they may not be as concerned with the plight of refugees. We also found results in line with Martén et al. (2019) that people with similar ethnicity tended to support refugee integrating with their communities on all aspects including refugee management, public perception, and work opportunities. This was contributed by the shared identity can easily create empathy and a sense of compassion for those who experienced a violation of their rights (Halabi & Nadler, 2017). Together, taking the income factors into consideration, local citizens with a lower level of income might have fewer positive attitudes towards the refugees than those with higher income, especially when those attitudes came to the government in managing refugees, social empathy, employment opportunities. This might be attributed to economic concerns (Ritchie, 2018). Local People with lower incomes may be more likely to view refugees as a potential source of competition for jobs and resources, leading to negative attitudes (Ritchie, 2018).

More importantly, in terms of occupational factors, farmer residents were significantly less likely to be concerned about life security and safety from refugees (İçduygu & Diker, 2017). This might be influenced by the fact that they relied on refugee workers to help with the harvest and other seasonal work (İçduygu & Diker, 2017). Lastly, the length of time that the local citizens were familiar with the refugees also played an essential role in their attitudes. The findings revealed that local people tended to have fewer positive attitudes when they have known the refugee for a more extended period (Henkelmann et al., 2020). This situation might be caused by some the negative things, such as tensions, and conflicts, from the refugees during their recognition (Henkelmann et al., 2020).

Based on these findings, we could suggest that the strategies to increase positive attitudes between residents and refugees were recommended to focus on demographic profiles, particularly related to whom that were same age, ethnicity, occupation, and income levels as these factors showed positive acceptance towards the social cohesion between the refugees and hosting populations despite there were lack of legal status. This would be expected to effectively strengthen interactions and communications between locals and refugees, which resulted in creating an welcoming environment where both groups feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives.

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