



2022

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### Recommended Citation

Nasution, Muhammad Zamal; Sciortino, Rosalia; Niyomsilpa, Sakkarin; and Punpuing, Sureeporn (2022) "Acculturation Strategies of the Recent Wave of Indonesian Migrants in Thailand," *Journal of Health Research*: Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/jhr/vol37/iss1/1>

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# Acculturation Strategies of the Recent Wave of Indonesian Migrants in Thailand

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## Abstract

**Background:** The rapid increase of Indonesian migrants to Thailand in the last two decades due to greater regional integration, transport connectivity, and internationalization of education. Different religion, socio-culture, and other sociodemographic factors might affect their adaptation to the Thai society.

**Method:** A mixed-method design was employed for data collection. The quantitative data were derived from an online survey of 268 respondents, while the qualitative data came from literature review, in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, and direct observation.

**Results:** Indonesian migrants tended to opt for an integration strategy and to a lesser extent a separation strategy, with assimilation and marginalization ranking lowest in the acculturation scale. Association test of socio-economic characteristics and acculturation strategies further showed conforming results with minimum variation. Qualitative findings broadly confirmed the overall preference for integration as the majority of Indonesian migrants, composed of students and professionals, is well-adapted to Thai society, despite religion and language differences. A minority composed of Indonesian housewives were more inclined toward separation when not engaged in entrepreneurial activities. Not surprisingly, the small number of Indonesian women in mixed marriages with a Thai national living in relatively isolated rural areas were more assimilated in Thai society. A counterintuitive association of assimilation and marginalization was further noted, which requires further research for a more complete explanation.

**Conclusion:** The dominant acculturation strategy of Indonesian migrants in Thailand is integration, followed by separation. Several sociodemographic factors, including education and occupation, influence these strategies.

**Keywords:** Acculturation strategy, Indonesian migrants in Thailand, Migration

## 1. Introduction

Intraregional migration in Southeast Asia has grown significantly in the last two decades as a livelihood strategy, with some studies noting a five-fold increase since 1990 [1,2]. Of the 20.2 million migrants from the ten member states countries of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), 6.9 million have moved within the region [3].

The Indonesian migrant community is one of the oldest in Thailand but has only recently seen rapid growth [4]. Documented interactions between the populations of what are today Indonesia and Thailand date back to the 11th century when the kingdoms in Sumatra and Java islands held close

cultural and trade relations with kingdoms in the southern part of Thailand. As of 1910, about thousands of Javanese resided in Bangkok and their number doubled by 1915 [5]. The descendants of these early migrants are today clustered around old mosques built in Javanese style in the Sathorn area of Bangkok. They have fully assimilated into Thai society while maintaining minimal native rituals. After World War II, some survivors among those who were brought as slaves or *romusha* by the Japanese troops to build the bridge on the Thailand–Myanmar border in Kanchanaburi Province remained in Thailand and took over Thai citizenship [6]. When the New Order regime came to power in 1965, new influxes of Indonesians arrived due to political conflict [7].

Received 16 April 2021; revised 14 July 2021; accepted 6 August 2021.  
Available online 20 July 2022

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<https://doi.org/XXXX/2586-940X.1000>

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It was only in recent decades, however, that the number of Indonesian migrants to Thailand increased significantly, spurred by greater regional integration and connectivity. From 2000 to 2010 their number grew from 549 to 2952 [4] and has continued to grow thereafter.

This article further explores who these migrants are and how they adapt to their destination country by discussing their socio-economic characteristics and acculturation strategies. The presented findings are derived from a study conducted on the Indonesian migrant community in Thailand to meet the requirements for a Ph.D. in Demography at the Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR) of Mahidol University in 2020. Albeit limited in scope and time, the study was the first on Indonesian migrants in Thailand and as such provided new insights on the variety of migrant communities in the country and intraregional migration in Southeast Asia. Migration studies in this region have mostly focused on lower-skilled GMS migrants, but have failed to take into account smaller and differently composed migrant communities from other ASEAN countries as well as from other continents such as Africa [8]. They also have given little or no attention to how migrants position themselves in Thai society. The Ph.D. study addressed these gaps, providing an overview of the Indonesian migrants in Thailand and their acculturation strategy. In particular, the study described what personal and socioeconomic characteristics they have, their distribution, and the way they interact among themselves and with the overall Thai society as well as the factors that influence such positioning [9].

In the following, due to limited space, focus will be on the adaptation of Indonesian migrants in Thailand using Berry's seminal work in 1997 and particularly his key concept of "acculturation strategies" or possible pathways migrants take when adapting to the host country and its different culture. This is of particular interest as there is very little research on acculturation strategies of Southeast Asians and, especially, Indonesian migrants. For those readers interested in other aspects of the research, namely Indonesian migrants' social networks, transnationalism practices, and impacts of national and regional migration management systems on the Indonesian migrant population, we refer to the original thesis [9].

## 2. Methodology

Multiculturalism is the process of cultural integration where the immigrant's cultures have an impact on the dominant culture [10]. In the case of migration, it refers to the interaction between

values, norms, and sub-cultures from the country of origin and the host country. Cultural transitions create several models of acculturation [11] broadly defined as "a process of cultural and psychological change that occurs when two cultural groups interact" [12]. Recent studies on acculturation use the frameworks of a one-dimensional or multidimensional approach in explaining the cultural transitions [11,13]. This last, envisioning more than a binary option, can capture the greater complexity of human acculturation [14].

The early models subscribing to the multidimensional approach examine various phases of cultural transitions as well as the level of integration resulting from engagement with dominant cultures [15–17]. Key to more recent models is Berry's four-dimensional ways in acculturation [18] which elaborates on the migrants' conscious attempt to complex cultural negotiations [13,19,20]. In interacting with their new habitat, migrants experience various levels of stress-triggered among others by economic, environmental, lifestyle, and psychological factors [18,21] and influenced by inclusion policies and public perceptions towards migrants and immigration [22]. The mechanism of adaptation to these multiple triggers of stress is influenced by the degree of interaction with people of other cultures in the larger plural society and to the degree to which they maintain their own culture and identity [17]. Following Berry [21], the study asked whether the dominant acculturation strategy of Indonesian migrants is to incorporate both identities (integration), fully take up the cultural identity of the host society (assimilation), focus on their own culture (separation), or disclaim both identities (marginalization), and try to assess how far different groups of Indonesian migrants employ diverse acculturation strategies.

To answer the research questions, besides secondary data derived from both published and gray literature sources, the study employed a mixed-method design using both quantitative and qualitative methods, namely an online survey, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation.

The cornerstone of the research was the online survey on individual characteristics, migration experiences, and acculturation strategies, which was conducted from February to May 2019. The measurement of acculturation strategies was adopted from Declan T Barry's East Asian Acculturation Measure (EAAM) [23] which was developed to improve the measurement of Berry's acculturation strategies [24,25]. This modified questionnaire has been validated and used in several investigations on

acculturation strategies of migrants from many countries [26–28]. Before the distribution, the questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Indonesia and tested on 20 migrants. The EAAM is:

“a 29-item self-report inventory, which measures four dimensions of acculturations outlined by Berry [18]: assimilation (8 items), separation (7 items), integration (5 items) and marginalization (9 items) ... Items are scored using a 7-point Likert scale” [23].

Like Barry, the study employed convenience sampling. Potential respondents with an Indonesian nationality and a minimum age of 18 years old, who had been residing in Thailand for more than three months were reached through personal and institutional connections, social media, public events, and word of mouth. The sample size was determined based on the available statistics by the Thai immigration, the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok as well as data collected by the Indonesian Overseas Election Commission (PPLN) in preparation for the Presidential election in August 2019. The total number of 268 respondents showed a fair representation being 15–20% of the entire migrant population. Data were analyzed by using Microsoft Excel 2018 and SPSS IBM version 22 software. The reliability measurement on the survey data showed a Cronbach Alpha value of .8 with nonnormality data distribution.

From February to September 2019, the researcher also observed migrants' activities and participated in several religious, social, and political events related to the Indonesian presidential election in Thailand. Following the survey result, 26 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions were held in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Udon Thani. Direct observation was also undertaken in October 2019 in the Ratchathewi district of Bangkok where most Indonesians in Bangkok are concentrated.

### 2.1. Ethical consideration

The protocol and data collection instruments were approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) of IPSR (COA. No. 2019/01-029).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Characteristics of respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of the 268 respondents [Table S1 (<https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/bmjs286gjk/1>)] reflected the composition

of the general population in Indonesia and were consistent to a large extent with the Indonesian Embassy and PPLN data. A large majority of respondents were Muslim (78%) in line with Islam being the majority religion in Indonesia and almost half were Javanese (47%) as the largest ethnic group in Indonesia followed by the Sundanese (11.6%) and other smaller groups. Sex distribution was balanced with a slightly higher number of females compared with males (137 and 131 respondents).

In terms of location, the large majority of respondents (83.6%) were concentrated in Bangkok and its neighboring areas in the central region Nakhon Pathom, Nonthaburi, and Pathum Thani districts where Thai leading universities and offices of large companies are located. Differing from the PPLN data, the second largest concentration was found in the northeast rather than in southern Thailand and more research is needed to explain this divergence.

Except for two respondents, all were born in Indonesia, indicating that this wave of migration is relatively recent as also transpires from the overall length of stay with a majority having been in Thailand for less than 5 years. The short-stay also relates to the age and occupation distribution. Most respondents are young with more than one-half below 39 years of age and 95% below 59 years of age. The large proportion of students and professionals or highly skilled employees in the population is also reflected in the sample's high educational levels with around 82% of respondents having obtained bachelor (51%) or master (31%) degrees. A large proportion (or 41%) of the respondents earned more than the mid-level income of 20,000 THB (662 USD) while 32%, probably students and lower-skilled workers, had lower earnings. The large majority declared to be formally regular, with only 3.7% or ten subjects reporting not having a visa. More than one-half, or 53.4% of the respondents are married. Among the 59% currently having a partner (married or unmarried), the majority (66.5%) had an Indonesian partner, while the remaining had partners of other nationalities, mainly Thai.

Due to the relatively short duration of stay, and the complexity of the Thai language for non-tonal speakers, most respondents had limited knowledge of Thai. The more fluent had been residing in Thailand for more than five years or planned to live there permanently. As discussed below, these longer stay migrants with language skills played an important function as 'cultural brokers' for the entire community.

### 3.2. Acculturation strategies of Indonesian migrants

The survey respondents as described above generally felt integrated into Thai society. From descriptive statistics of mean and standard of deviation for each type of acculturation strategy, a greater agreement was found for integration and secondarily for separation, while stronger disagreement was found for assimilation and particularly marginalization (Table 1).

As they explained during the in-depth interviews and FGDs, the tolerant and international culture in Bangkok and surrounding cities made them feel accepted in practicing their culture without fear of discrimination. It also helped that their community was nested in locations with a strong presence of Muslims from the Southern part of Thailand who could speak Malay or lived in residential areas with an international presence. Respondents were open to friendships with Thais and people of other nationalities, and strongly rejected the view that

“Indonesians should not date non-Indonesians”, although their closest friends remained Indonesian and there was an appreciation for Indonesian social events (regularly organized by the Indonesian embassy and related organizations).

Respondents further disagreed the most with the marginalization-related statement “Generally, I find it difficult to socialize with anybody, Indonesian or Thai” signifying a certain level of comfort with living in Thailand and confidence in the ability to socialize with everyone including Indonesians and Thais.

To better understand the interdependency of the four acculturation strategies, the nonparametric test of Spearman's rho was applied. The test showed that assimilation correlated positively with integration. Showing a preference for integration as their acculturation strategy, Indonesian migrants also indicated an intention to assimilate into Thai society wherever possible. Overall, the respondents opted for integrating and separating while at the same time admitting the option of assimilating and

Table 1. Acculturation strategies of Indonesian migrants in Thailand (N = 268).

Type of Acculturation	Mean	SD
<b>Assimilation</b>		
- I write better in Thai than in my native language.	1.50	.89
- When I am in my apartment/house, I typically speak Thai.	2.75	1.81
- If I were asked to write poetry, I would prefer to write in Thai.	2.84	1.70
- I get along better with Thais than Indonesians.	2.95	1.52
- I feel that Thais understand me better than Indonesians do.	2.72	1.41
- I find it easier to communicate my feelings to Thais than to Indonesians.	2.88	1.40
- I feel more comfortable socializing with Thais than I do with Indonesians.	2.74	1.37
- Most of my friends at work/school are Thais.	4.32	1.96
<b>Separation</b>		
- Most of the music I listen to is Indonesian.	3.87	1.72
- My closest friends are Indonesian.	4.84	1.83
- I prefer going to social gatherings where most people are Indonesian.	4.60	1.65
- I feel that Indonesians treat me as an equal more so than Thais do.	3.26	1.40
- I would prefer to go out on a date with an Indonesian than with a Thai.	3.99	1.70
- I feel more relaxed when I am with an Indonesian than when I am with a Thai.	4.03	1.64
- Indonesians should not date non-Indonesians.	1.71	1.25
<b>Integration</b>		
- I tell jokes both in Thai and in Bahasa Indonesia.	3.43	1.75
- I think as well in Thai as I do in Bahasa Indonesia.	3.45	1.77
- I have both Thai and Indonesian friends.	5.71	1.42
- I feel that both Indonesians and Thais value me.	5.72	1.35
- I feel very comfortable around both Thais and Indonesians.	4.71	1.47
<b>Marginalization</b>		
- Generally, I find it difficult to socialize with anybody, Indonesian or Thai.	1.45	.99
- I sometimes feel that neither Thais nor Indonesians like me.	2.39	1.42
- There are times when I think no one understands me.	2.93	1.79
- I sometimes find it hard to communicate with people.	3.05	1.66
- I sometimes find it hard to make friends.	2.41	1.37
- Sometimes I feel that Indonesians and Thais do not accept me.	2.25	1.38
- Sometimes I find it hard to trust both Indonesians and Thais.	2.13	1.39
- I find that Indonesians and Thais often have difficulty understanding me.	2.29	1.35
- I find that I feel uncomfortable when I am with other people.	2.93	1.78

Note: Acculturation was measured by Likert 7 scales: 1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Disagree somewhat, 4 Neutral, 5 Agree somewhat, 6 Agree, 7 Agree strongly.

marginalizing (Table 2). A counterintuitive finding was that assimilation somehow also correlated positively with marginalization, which could be related to the realities of specific groups of migrants as discussed below.

3.3. Acculturation strategies of different migrant groups

Test of association between acculturation strategies and individual factors and migration experiences showed overall conforming patterns with an overall preference for integration and to a lesser extent for separation and a general rejection of assimilation and particularly marginalization. Only some slight variations could be found mainly for assimilation and on a single factor for separation and integration namely educational level for separation and type of occupation for integration. Furthermore, Muslim respondents tended to resist assimilation more while Buddhist respondents were more inclined to assimilate, which can be expected considering the majority religion in Thailand is Buddhism. Similarly, it is not surprising that the respondents with Thai partners were the most inclined towards assimilation, while those with Indonesian partners refrained the most from it. Length of stay also encouraged assimilation and so did permanent residency status.

Indonesian migrants' ways of integrating while different (Table 3), equally benefit from the international nature of their interactions in Thailand. In general, Indonesian students were proud of their study and experience abroad and possessed an

overall positive view of Thai society. They interacted with Thais and students of other nationalities regularly and maintained a strong sense of community with other Indonesian students and the Indonesian community. Various religious-oriented groups according to faith and doctrine meet online as well as physically. In addition, many virtual groups on Line and WhatsApp are dedicated to living in Thailand. Adaptation starts before coming to Thailand as precious information is available online for prospective students. The wide opportunity for study and career in Thailand encouraged the young migrants to practice the Thai language and culture. Some of them eventually married Thais and/or remained to work in Thailand. In their interaction with the wider Thai society, they were helped by longer-term residents in overcoming economic and linguistic challenges.

Higher-skilled workers and professionals worked and frequently interacted with Thais and people of other nationalities (some also being in transnational marriages or partnerships), communicating mostly in English. Albeit they appreciated the interaction with other Indonesians, they did not feel the need to reside in an Indonesian community. Key housing considerations included distance to the workplace and vicinity to international schools in English and also possibly in Chinese for their children, which were chosen according to cost and reputation. Most resided for a determined time before returning to headquarters in Indonesia or moving to another country. They were satisfied with the international lifestyle the country offers and appreciated that they could enjoy a higher standard of living than in their hometown and at a lower price than in Jakarta, for instance, as well as the quality of telecommunication and transportation infrastructure. When they missed Indonesia, they could easily return as many flights are available between Thai and Indonesian main cities.

As indicated by the survey results lower education and lack of formal occupation tend to encourage separation from the overall Thai and international

Table 2. Correlation between acculturation strategies (N = 268).

	1	2	3	4
Assimilation	–			
Separation	.033	–		
Integration	.381**	.123*	–	
Marginalization	.392**	.070	-.112	–

\*\*P < .01, \*P < .05.

Table 3. Acculturation strategies by different migrant groups.

	Students	Skilled/Professional	Housewives with Medium and Lower-skilled Indonesian Spouses	Housewives with Lower-skilled Thai Spouses
Acculturation	Integration	Integration	Separation	Assimilation
Language	English	English	Indonesian	Thai
Friends	Indonesian, Thai	Multinational, Indonesian	Indonesian	Thai
Gathering	Varies	Multinational	Indonesian	Thai
Residence	Varies	Multinational	Indonesian	Thai
Culture	Indonesian	Multinational, Indonesian	Indonesian	Thai, Indonesian
Meals	Varies	Multinational, Indonesian	Indonesian	Thai, Indonesian
Halal Status	Varies	Flexible	Strict	Not strict

community. This can be seen with dependent wives married to medium and lower-skilled workers residing in large Indonesian communities like in the Ratchathewi district of Bangkok. Their responsibility was to accompany the husband and take care of the household and the children. Their capacity to speak English was often limited and so was their social life as they were mainly among family members and other Indonesians. Only when they stayed longer in Thailand and started to explore economic benefits, particularly in doing informal jobs such as catering and selling Thai products in Indonesia, their strategy changed towards integration as they had to interact more with clients and traders in the wider Thai society.

At the other end of the spectrum, as also shown by the test of association between acculturation strategies and individual factors, the small group of Indonesian women married to Thai men was more inclined to assimilate compared to the great majority of Indonesian migrants. Initially, they integrated and endeavored to preserve links with both cultures, but progressively assimilated with their husbands' family lifestyle and adapted to the Isaan culture of the Northeast with some also practicing Buddhist rituals though they had initially held different religious commitments and beliefs. Their daily communication was in Thai and they met mainly Thais because they were isolated in the rural area and financial limits prevented them from traveling. Assimilation, however, also coexisted with a feeling of marginalization due to issues of religious differences, marital strain, lack of support networks, economic insecurity, and isolation. Whether this could be an explanation for the counterintuitive association of assimilation and marginalization requires further investigation.

#### 4. Conclusion

This first study of the Indonesian migrant community in Thailand aimed to understand the Indonesian migrants' characteristics and migration experiences and the ways they adapt to Thai society. The various quantitative and qualitative methods employed in the research are consistent in showing that the dominant acculturation strategy of Indonesian migrants in Thailand is integration. This overall result is influenced by the fact that Indonesian migrants were for large part students and professionals and higher-skilled employees who are well-adapted to Thai society while remaining only for a limited time. They thus have a positive attitude but are not inclined to assimilation. Thanks to the international environment and the engagement of

'cultural brokers' they were able to overcome religion and language differences and be satisfied with their experience abroad.

Level of education and type of occupation results in some slight variations with higher educated professionals and students more inclined toward assimilation and integration and lower educated with basic education more inclined toward separation, which could be related to the lower capacity to function in the English language. A minority composed of Indonesian housewives were more inclined toward separation when not engaged in entrepreneurial activities. A small number of lower-skilled Indonesian women in mixed marriages with Thai nationals were, however, more assimilated in Thai society also because they lived in isolated, all-Thai, rural settings.

The association test while confirming the Indonesian migrants' general rejection of assimilation and marginalization strategies, found a counterintuitive association between assimilation and marginalization. An explanation of this paradox was attempted to the 'forced' assimilation of Indonesian wives of Thai nationals in an isolated rural setting, but more research is needed to satisfactorily explain it, including on whether Barry's scale is culturally sensitive to the Thai context. Comparison to the previously mentioned studies among Indonesian migrants in other Asian countries does not highlight shared acculturation practices, besides possibly a greater propensity of the student population for an adaptation like was also partly the case in Taiwan.

#### Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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