

# **Cultural Change in the Life of the Khmer Immigrant Laborers in Bình Dương Province**

**Phan Anh Tu**

University of Social Sciences and Humanities Vietnam National University - Ho  
Chi Minh City

## **Abstract**

It is estimated at 1.3 million people; the Khmer community is one of the four main ethnic groups living in the Mekong Delta. Agriculture is the primary method by which people earned a living, Theravada Buddhism has been received and associated with the spiritual life of the Khmer. Over the last 10 years, the climate change is one of the causes affecting agricultural production and also the result of Khmer labor immigration to the city. There has become a wave of labor immigration, many Khmer people leaving their villages to seek employment in urban areas in the Eastern region of Southern Vietnam.

In Bình Dương Province, the Khmer immigrant laborers has scattered into small groups basing on their local origin, residing in the poor accommodation. They are suffering the vulnerability for social statue and living condition. Their cultural life is transformed by the strength of urban society and the nature of their livelihood. This issue will be discussed in this paper in order to address the cultural life of the Khmer immigrant labor groups in this biggest city in Vietnam.

**Keywords: the Khmer, immigrant, laborers, Bình Dương, Province**

## **Introduction**

Research on the ethnic characteristics, cultural changes and economic activities of the Khmer in the Southern Vietnam has long been mentioned in a number of articles and research works. The studies point out some typical characteristics of the Khmer's labor immigration as follows: their targeted destinations are Ho Chi Minh city and Binh Duong Province, the two most economically developed centres in Vietnam; the Khmer are mainly engaged in such low-skilled jobs as construction workers, domestic workers, and waitress/ waiters in family restaurants; Most of the Khmer migrants are young people; they migrate because of economic reasons; and their lives as migrants are not cared by the local government due to their migrant status; having no cultivated land, no jobs and low incomes in their hometown has forced the Khmer to migrate to big cities (Ngo Thi Thu Trang et al 2016). An important and surprising finding is that although labour immigration is an important financial contribution to the Khmer' life, this improvement is not a result of several rural development programs run by the local government or the state government but that of their use of social capital as alternative trajectories (Taylor 2007).

## **Methods and Theories**

To complete this article, the author used the research theories such as ethno-ecology,

structural functionalism as well as the theory of cultural change to study the effects of the natural environment that leads to the livelihood choice of Khmer people in Tan Hiep Commune, Tra Cu District, Tra Vinh Province and the effects of the social situation to the residing location where the Khmer has immigrated to, is Chieu Lieu Street, Tan Dong Hiep Ward, Di An District, Binh Duong Province. Moreover, the Qualitative research has been applied in the research that is conducted for materials by field notes, participant and observation (in – depth interviewing), interview of oral history for the article.

## **Why does the Khmer move to the city?**

The Khmer is an ethnic group in Vietnam where the Viet (or the Kinh) is the majority. Among Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups, they are one of the three groups traditionally living in the Mekong Delta. The others live mostly in mountainous and remote areas. However, due to their underdeveloped living conditions, they have received a lot of attention and consideration from the government. The Khmer under research mainly farm for their living. They plant water-rice, vegetables, fruits and other crops. They also raise livestock and aquaculture. A number of them are hired labourers, and someone have become workers lately.

The phenomenon of Khmer labor migration took place in the early 1990s. However, it has exploded into a labor migration movement from

Tra Cu district (Tra Vinh Province) and the other localities in the Mekong Delta to Ho Chi Minh City and the province of the Eastern region of the Southern Vietnam, Binh Duong Province. The reason comes from the climate change of coastal areas such as Tra Cu district, Tra Vinh Province, where a large number of Khmer people has been living. The sea water has penetrated into the rice fields, making it impossible for the Khmer to cultivate. They also do not have enough the capital and agricultural knowledge to convert to another form of economy. This causes them to sell their fields or leave their fields, houses and families to immigrate to Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong Province in search of manual labor partners to sustain their lives.

### **The urban life of Khmer Immigrants and their transformation in the New Year Celebration**

The Khmer who has been living on agricultural livelihood in a location, can easily participate in their traditional festivals, Chol Chnam Thmay, the New Year Festival in Khmer language that takes place in the middle of April solar calendar. For those who are working in the city or immigrant workers, their fun only organized on the Lunar New Year of the Viet group who are major in the cities of Vietnam. In the companies the Khmer immigrants are working for, that take economic goals as important strategy, they cannot allow the Khmer

a time off during their traditional New Year festival (Chol Chnam Thmay). Long Viet Wood Production Company that is located in Chieu Lieu Street, Tan Dong Hiep Ward, Di An District, Binh Duong Province, however, is a special case, on the occasion of the annual Khmer New Year Celebration, the company allows the Khmer workers to rest within three days (April 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>). With a large number of Khmer workers and they come from the same hometown, Tan Hiep Commune, Tra Cu District, Long Viet Company sent shuttles to transport workers to their home town. When they end the festival the company will get them to Binh Duong. In the past two years, however, due to financial difficulties, the company only allowed Khmer workers to take three rested-days in the new year festivals, they could not provide the shuttle service to bring them to their hometown as before. Without company vehicles, Khmer workers chose to rest on the rent-houses, they did not buy a public-vehicles-ticket to Tra Cu. Explaining the reason, a Khmer worker, Mr. Thai Luong (39 years old), said: *"I have a day off during the Chol Chnam Thmay, New Year Celebration, but I do not return to my hometown, because of the cost of buying a vehicle ticket, plus food. It cost about 500,000 VND. Resting at the place is both mentally comfortable and saves money to send to my ancient mother."*

Except for Long Viet Company, other companies do not allow Khmer workers to take off working on the occasion of traditional festivals, provide by Thach Thi Ngoan, a Khmer

woman who works for Thai Binh Garment Company: *"The company says that there are so many Khmer people working but they have no concept of Khmer people. The company does not take a break for Chol Chnam Thmay New Year Celebration, other holidays of the Khmer, we have to stay here and work"*. The life of Khmer immigrant labourers depends on the company's schedule, during the Khmer Traditional New Year Celebration, Chol Chnam Thmay, they also do not have time to organize cultural activities or have fun together, Ms. Thach Thi Ngoan (30 years old) added: *"There are many Khmer people living here, but they are all immigrants, each person come from different places, so no one organizes performances, also wants to have a cultural program but has no conditions. During the Chol holidays, the company doesn't give me a break, I work overtime, life is very busy and tired for me, so I can't participate in cultural events."*

Because there is no rest on the Khmer traditional festivals, all rest and entertainment activities of the Khmer workers take place during the Lunar New Year of Vietnamese people. This is an opportunity for the Khmer immigrant workers come home and stay with their families. The livelihood characteristics of the Khmer immigrants that have caused a social phenomenon, large number of the Khmer who have gathered in countryside during the annual Lunar New Year. This makes the commodity market in the local markets much more vibrant than usual. The characteristics of workers'

livelihoods force the Khmer to follow the holiday process of the Vietnamese Labour Law, which is promulgated basing on the characteristics of the Viet people's festival culture, the majority in Vietnamese society.

The Khmer workers have no other choice; the living situation makes them have to convert their entertainment activities from celebrating their Traditional New Year (Chol Chnam Thmay) to the Lunar New Year. For the Khmer who earn a living by hard labour, organizing parties with the drinks, beer, are considered expensive behaviour, so they rarely hold it, except on occasions when they earn a lot of money adding with the full happiness when they complete an important issue. Every year, with the number holidays of Lunar New Year combining with bonuses from the company that allowed Khmer workers to organize a party to gather with the relatives and friends with beer as the main drink. Enjoying the party is also a way for family and guests to recognize the fruits of their hard work after a year, and only on Lunar New Year, Khmer workers dare to drink beer on the normal days.

The change of holidays, the Khmer workers directly affects not only their own spiritual culture but also their family members. Fun activities, family reunions of Khmer workers are also forced to change according to the holiday schedule prescribed by the company. Since then, participation in traditional festivals for these families is sometimes only a responsibility, because the young men have migrated to work

and they are busy in the far areas so how their parents can organize the celebration at home. The old-aged-men have to neglect the traditional festivals of their local community to focus on the Lunar New Year because when their children and relatives will get back. A matter is that if the Khmer immigrants want to organize a party for the family for fun and reunion, they must have such money available. Only the occasion of the Lunar New Year, therefore, Khmer workers can receive bonuses that are considered more generous than other holidays. This amount of money will play a decisive role for the parties to create the atmosphere of family reunion of the Khmer who work as immigrant workers.

### **The cultural change in the ancestor worshipped cult and Theravada Buddhist practice for the Khmer immigrant labourers**

In relation to Khmer Theravada Buddhism, the cultural changes in the timing of Buddhist temple visits and rites often take place among Khmer labour immigrants to Bình Dương Province. Due to the difficult economic situation, along with the workers' lives has been tied to the working schedule of the production facilities, the Khmer immigrant workers have no free time to go to Buddhist temples like the others living in the villages. For the Khmer immigrants, their relationship with Buddhism sometimes only presents in some obligatory rituals related to family members such as the funeral ceremony for

their deceased parents. Their life is far away from the traditional residence, even on weekends they cannot travel hundreds of kilometers to visit Khmer temples in their countryside. Meanwhile, their spiritual life always needs a temple for resolving the social pressure and support from Khmer monks for the form of spiritual consultation, ceremony and ritual for safety as the rules in the tradition of Khmer Theravada Buddhism. In the temporary residence region for Khmer immigrant workers, there are some Mahayana Buddhist temples of the Viet group that are located nearby. A question is why the Khmer not to go to these temples when they cannot reach to Theravada Buddhist temples. Ms. Thach Thi Ngoan (30 years old), from No Dung Hamlet, Tan Hiep Commune, Tra Cu district, currently works as a handbag sewing worker for a company in Di An District, Binh Duong Province. She and her husband temporarily stayed in a hired-room in Chieu Lieu Street, Tan Dong Hiep Ward, she mentioned as follows: *“There are no (Khmer) pagodas here, so we cannot come for praying. There is a temple in this location, but it is different from Khmer temples. We are the Khmer, we cannot go to Vietnamese pagodas, because Vietnamese pagodas worshipping and chanting are quite different from us, so the Khmer feel it is too strange. I really want to go to the temple, but I can't go there, because there is no Khmer temple here. It is normal when the Viet group come to Khmer temple but the Khmer cannot go to the Viet*

*pagodas*".

The explanation of Ms. Thach Thi Ngoan shows that the main reason for the Khmer immigrant workers who do not come to pray at the Viet temples is the difference in ethnic culture as well as the rituals of chanting and worshipping of the Mahayana Buddhist sect that cannot match to the Khmer customs. This is the reason why the Khmer cannot convert to the chanting ritual of the Mahayana Buddhist monks of the Viet group. The life of Khmer immigrant workers can change under the influence of social circumstances, but the rituals related to human life rituals are unchanged because it quietly and deeply preserved in Khmer temples. Therefore, even though they live far away their hometown, whenever they need to organize rituals for their families, the Khmer immigrant workers have to go back and invite monks to host the ceremony. The life is difficult in new lands, without a suitable temple to solve spiritual problems, so the Buddha altar is considered as the spiritual support of the Khmer immigrant workers. The observations in the rent-rooms of the Khmer temporarily staying in Chieu Lieu Street show that they all set up Buddha altars in the corner of hired-rooms. Unlike the solemn decoration of the Buddha altar in his hometown with a set of glass paintings that depicts Buddha Shakyamuni in Khmer style, incense bowls and flower arrangements, the altar here is very simple. Wooden planks make an altar, on top of which there is a bowl of incense and a small Buddha

image. Some families only decorate a picture of Buddha with a bowl of incense in front. It seems that the Khmer immigrant workers also determined that in order to call a Buddhist altar, there must be some sign of Buddhism to be able to worship. Their choice is to buy small Buddha statues or pictures of Buddha painted on Chinese-made nylon fabric placed on the altar to determine the location of a Buddha altar. Thach Thi Ngoan said: *"The Khmer lives here, every family has a Buddha altar; my altar has a tiny Buddha statue bought at the market here, it not to come from Tra Vinh Province, my hometown."*

During the labor immigration process to Binh Duong Province, the Khmer in Tan Hiep Commune had no religious preparation. They leave their home with the important decision that is to search for a work and not knowing how the life would be in a new place. When they find out that they need to go to the temple, need to pray for the social problems that they are facing in their life, but there is no Khmer temple there, they have to set up a Buddha altar on their hired-room and pray by the way which they think is the most appropriate. Working time takes up all of their daily day, so they can't go to Tra Vinh Province, their hometown to ask for any worshipped paintings from the Khmer temples that should be conducted by a chanted ceremony from Khmer monks and bring to the city where they are hired. The other Khmers who temporarily stay in Chieu Lieu Street also perform the same worshipping rituals as Mr. Thach Thi Ngoan's practice; they

buy Buddha statues or Buddha paintings from the stores on roadside when they go home from the night-time work. Because they have no other choice to meet spiritual needs in their life.

When we study the influence of Theravada Buddhism in the spiritual life of Khmer immigrant workers, the most important transformation that is taking place is the rite on the Buddha altars. To explain it, we think that it comes from the living situation of the Khmer who are materially deprived, temporary living in the hired-room and above all, they live far from the temple, without any guidance from monks about the rites. Meanwhile, they are in need of religion to overcome spiritual problems that always arise in their difficult and closed living situation. This led to the choice of a simple form for Buddha worshipped cult. There are only changes in the worship of the Khmer immigrant workers, here, not the changes related to Khmer Theravada Buddhism. We believe that worshipping Buddha in a place where is far away from the homeland, has allowed the Khmer to arrange how they feel fit in the absence of the monks.

The important rituals for the Khmer in general, for examples visiting pagodas, blessings, praying for peaceful life, for the dead, all must follow the standards of Khmer Theravada Buddhism. Since, these types of rituals request the role of monks, the Khmer who have gone to monastic life can assist the monks in performing the ceremony, but they cannot stand in the position as a monk. Living far away their

homeland, the Khmer immigrant workers always need religion as a spiritual mean but the changes in the rituals always happens depending on social and economic conditions. The Buddha statues of Theravada Buddhism are not available in the city; in shops, imported Buddha statues from Thailand that are sold with the price higher than what come from China. These changes are only within the worshipped scope for the Khmer immigrant workers, the other rituals of the community are still preserved because it depends on the role of the Khmer monks.

### **Homeland-returned-trend of the Khmer labor immigrants**

Suffering the pressure from factories and complicated social relations that makes the Khmer feel psychologically stressed, in which situation they want to go to the temple to find a way to relieve from the monks' sutras. When they return to their hometown, the psychological state is balanced again, and going to the temple only depending on their customs and responsibilities, it is not an urgent need as the duration they stay in Binh Duong Province. At the countryside, the Khmer immigrant workers feel they have fulfilled their responsibilities to the temple by asking their parents who come to the temple for praying and offering to the monks, every month, so they do not need to go further. Moreover, the Lunar New Year holiday is not in the time of traditional festivals of the Khmer, according to their custom, they are not necessarily to go to the temple for

worshipping the Buddha or visiting the monks. Recognizing the future life, the Khmer immigrant workers want to go home to live. Ms. Thach Thi Nguyen explains as follows: *"the life here is too stuffy; the house is too expensive to buy, here. Yes, the air is too polluted. Because of the life I have to stay here, I honestly don't like this place at all. The society here is complicated, stealing and fighting in this area is always happened"*.

Among the reasons that Ms. Nguyen gives, most of them fall into her social perception, which reflects the spatial context in which she and the other Khmers have so much suffered. The young men in Tra Cu are, now, facing the same situation as Thach Thi Ngoan and Thach Thi Nguyen, they were born and raised up in a rural area, they have never been to any city, even Tra Vinh City, their hometown. Because of living, they have to come here and live in a new land. The sudden change in living context has made so many Khmer people are unable to withstand in social pressure so they want to go home.

When they leave the city (Binh Duong Province) for their countryside, they must face to the other pressure, not job available, bored scene of the countryside when the evening comes, that force them to return to Binh Duong Province. Mr. Thach Sa Mai (29 years old man), originally from Con Lop hamlet, Tan Hiep commune, also once left his hired-room for hometown when he felt unfamiliar with his work and life in Binh Duong. Staying in his countryside for a while, he was unable to find a suitable job, he decided to return

to Binh Duong to work. Here, he met and married Mrs. Thach Thi Nguyen, the family life gave him emotional and religious consolation. Since then, he has not left here as if he was single. Observing the labor immigration of the young Khmer in Ngoc Bien commune, Venerable Kim Rune said: *"Some young Khmer people go to the city to work but everything is not going well, so they return to their village. Living in the countryside for a while and then they also found a way to come back the city, because their parents were poor in the village. It was so boring at night and the parents only serve them fried rice for breakfast. Meanwhile, life in the city teaches them the habit of eating noodle soup in the morning, drinking milky coffee, smoking cigarette, before going to work. Their poverty forced them to find their way back to the city"*.

## Conclusion

As the economy develops, the Khmer also increase their financial ability to make a large contribution to the temple. This support has made Khmer Theravada Buddhism that has been developing with positive changes. For the Khmer immigrant workers, due to the fact that they live far away from the temples, they form worshipped rituals that is directed from the simplification. The tendency to worship Buddha in hired-rooms, however, often presents among the Khmer-married-couples who are cognitively mature in their life. The young Khmer immigrant workers tend to relieve stress by the way of group



gatherings, maybe the mentality of youth often wants to prove their bravery rather than praying for protection. Therefore, when a young man who comes to religion are often considered a weak person in the life. Unlike young men working at home, the young immigrant workers live and work in an unfamiliar space context, without direct orientation from their parents, comforting words from monks. In times of stress, drinking is sometimes seen as a form of relief and tightening of friendships. But sometime, drinking makes them even more stressed, no one gives in to anyone because everyone wants to prove their ability. Extreme conflicts lead to fights like what happened in the Khmer's accommodation in Chieu Lieu street.

Leaving their job to return to their hometown to escape the pressure of work shows the helplessness and pessimism of some young men who has lived away from their villages when they cannot look for a spiritual support as married-couples have done. The young men who reached to labored-age in Tan Hiep Commune all went to Binh Duong Province for work. Leaving in the space of countryside and the Khmer temples also means leaving the tradition of monasticism as a duty for young men to grow up. Facing to economic difficulties in life in the countryside, many young men were forced to migrate to work as soon as they were 18 years old, the pressure of making a living did not allow them to have a period of study in the temples and schools. When they step out of society, therefore, their perception

of religion also gradually changes in a negative direction.

## References

Dang Nguyen Anh 2008. "Immigration and Welfare in Vietnam". Proceedings from the conference on Welfare in Vietnam: Preparing for a new development period. Hanoi, September.

Ethnicity Committee of Tra Vinh Province 2016. Report on supporting policies toward the Khmer in Tra Vinh Province.

Huynh Truong Huy 2009. "Analysis of Labor Migration Decisions: Its Determinants and Benefits, the Case of Khmer Families in Tra Vinh Province of Vietnam". Deposen Working Paper Series, No. 20.

Le Bach Duong, Tran Giang Linh and Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao Nguyen Dinh Huon 1999. Production and Life of Farmers who have No Land or Little Land in the Mekong Delta: Reality and Suggestions. Publisher of National Politics.

Le Thanh Sang 2007. "Urban Migration in Pre and Post – Reform Viet Nam: Macro Pattern and Determinants of Urbanward Migration, the 1984-1089 and 1994-1999 Periods". Proceeding of the 8th International Conference of Asia Pacific Migration Research Network, May, p. 92-103. Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, Fujian, China.

Nguyen Thi Hoa 2009. "Women Migrant House Workers from the Mekong Delta to Ho Chi Minh City: Research from Ward 9 Tra Vinh

Province". Vietnamese Studies Conference, p. 350-374.

Ravenstein 1889. "The Law of Migration". Journal of Royal Statistical Society, No. 52, p. 241-305.

Taylor P. 2007. "Poor Policies, Wealthy Peasants; Alternative Trajectories of Rural Development in Vietnam". Journal of Vietnamese Studies, No. 2, p. 3-56.

Todaro M. 1997. Economic Development. England, Addison-Wesley.

Le Bach Duong, Tran GiangLinh and Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao 2011. "Social Protection for Rural – Urban Migrants in Vietnam: Current Situation, Challenges and Opportunities". CSP Research Report, No. 08.

Nguyen Dinh Huong 1999. Production and life of farmers who have no land or little land in the Mekong Delta: reality and suggestions. Publisher of National Politics.

Ngo Thi Thu Trang, Ho Thi Kim, Chau Thi Thu Thuy and Ngo Hoang Dai Long 2016. "Thích ứng sinh kế của người nhập cư Khmer tại quận ven đô: điển cứu tại phường Bình Trị Đông B và phường An Lạc, quận Bình Tân, thành phố Hồ Chí Minh." (Livelihood Adaptation of the Khmer Migrants in a Suburban District: Case studies in Binh Tri Dong B and An Lac wards, Binh Tan District, Ho Chi Minh City. Tạp chí Phát triển Khoa học Công nghệ (Science and Technology Development Journal, Vol. 19, No X2.



## Authors Basic Information

English Name : Phan Anh Tu

Affiliation/Position : Director of Center for Theoretical and Applied  
Culturology (CTAC), University of Social Sciences  
and Humanities (USSH)– Vietnam National  
University in HCMC (VNU).

Highest Education : Ph.D

Expertises : Vietnamese culture

Publications : *Dialogue, focus: Gap in Indic studies ; Dialogue, focus:*  
*Indian Thinkers; Market integration in ASEAN: sustainable*  
*growth and cross-cultural issues; Vietnam National*  
University HCMC Press; *Dialogue Quarterly Magazine;*  
New Archaeological Discovery; HCMC Museum of  
Vietnam History; Magazine of Culture and Art