

Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Migrant Social Networks of Tom Yam Restaurants in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper aims to better understand immigrant entrepreneurs by examining the resources of their migrant social networks' conducive to the construction of Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia. For this purpose, I conducted in-depth interviews with Tom Yam restaurant immigrant entrepreneurs in Malaysia who are Thai and Melayu Muslim from Southern Thailand chosen by use of the snowballing sampling technique in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. It was found that in the Tom Yam restaurant business in Malaysia there is an indispensable interconnection between migrant entrepreneurs' social networks based on ethnicity and their establishment of successful businesses. Migrant social networks play a significant role in the immigrant entrepreneurialism. These networks represent a meso level study linking explanations of personal relationships, which lie at the micro level, to social structure factors, which are considered to lie at the macro level

Keywords: Immigrant Entrepreneur, Migrant Social Network, Migration, Ethnicity, Employment

Introduction

Immigrant entrepreneurs are defined as foreigners who have their own businesses in destination countries (Light & Bonacich, 1988; Light, Sabagh, Bozorgmehr, & Der-Martirosian, 1994; Verdaguer, 2009). Many attempts have been made to comprehend the extent and nature of these entrepreneurs' restricted opportunities to gain access to resources in such countries. These restrictions to self-employment and entrepreneurialism are the result of race and ethnic discrimination, language difficulties and insecurity (Light & Bonacich, 1988; Light et al., 1994; Light, 2004).

While several scholars specializing in migrant entrepreneurs have directed our attention to self-employment in destination countries (Light & Bonacich, 1988; Light et al., 1994; Verdaguer, 2009) most research has been done on developed destination countries where there are opportunities for migrants to settle. A large number of immigrants are provided with limited resources in such countries. Other limitations, prevail such as race discrimination, language difficulties and fewer employment opportunities. Because of the fewer chances of employment in their destination countries, they are likely to run their own business. In so doing, supportive factors are more available. As a result, the majority of them have moved to self-employment system in their destination countries (Light & Bonacich, 1988; Light et al., 1994)

Migrant social networks, central to migrant decision-making and to the success of migration, are bridges connecting the micro level to the macro level, individuals to social structures (Massey, Alarco'n, Durand, & Gonza'lez, 1987). As part of daily life, they can put people in touch with important resources such as news about business opportunities, information about prices, labour availability and its cost, services and products, psychological support, and

capital. They are a crucial dimension for business construction and human resource management (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Werbner, 1990; Portes, 1995). Mars and Ward (1984) and Waldinger, Aldrich and Ward (1990) in particular, discuss the role of ethnicity as a resource for migrant entrepreneurs in their destination countries, the trust given to one another and their access to capital from within the ethnic social network. Werbner (1990) suggests that the ethnic social network members share their experiences with other members, help connect them with people outside their group and provide access to cheap and reliable workers, products and services. It is important to draw attention to this network approach on an analysis of the social relation and ties between individual along the migration past as meso level (Bunmak, 2012).

Malaysia is a destination country with a significantly increasing rate of immigration mainly from Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand (Kanapathy, 2001; Ananta & Arifin, 2004; Hugo, 2004; Kanapathy, 2008). The majority of Thai immigrants to Malaysia are Muslims from the southern border provinces of Thailand (Klanarong, 2005). In Malaysia, most of these immigrants work in or own Tom Yam restaurants¹, which depend upon a constant supply of Muslim migrant workers from the Southern Thailand (Rahimmula, 2008; Bunmak, 2012; 2013). The question is, how do these migrants become entrepreneurs in a foreign country given the obstacles in their way? The answer lies in their capacity to mobilize the resources of the migrant social networks that they inhabit, sustain and use.

Migrant Social Network Concept

In migration studies, a “migrant social network” is defined as a set of cross-border interpersonal ties connecting migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in places of origin and destination through the bonds of kinship, friendship and a shared community of origin (Massey et al., 1987; Gurak & Caces, 1992; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, & Taylor, 1998). Thus, this definition refers to the personal relationships based on kin, family, friends and community that connect people in two or more areas. These relationships establish mutual trust among network members. Migrant social networks are important in facilitating migration and, more significantly in the beginning stages, in encouraging potential migrant workers.

Over the past several decades, in a variety of ways, scholars have paid increasing attention to the concept of migrant social networks to understand migration, including the decision to migrate; the direction and persistence of migration flows; and the process of adaptation and patterns of settlement. Migrants pass their knowledge to newly arrived migrants through social ties that assist migration in several ways. Members of migrant networks provide information about jobs and accommodation, and migrant networks reduce the costs of travel and of living. These networks assist with finance, accommodation, food and transportation. The literature shows that migrant social networks link original and destination communities and ease the newly arrived migrants into their new ways of life (Bunmak, 2012, 2013).

Migrant social networks, central to migrant decision making and to the success of migration, are bridges connecting the micro level to the macro level, individuals to social structures (Massey et al., 1987). The analysis of these networks represents a medium-level study linking explanations of personal relationships, which lie at the micro level, to social structure factors, which are considered to lie at the macro level. Additionally, the role of the immigrant is considered that of a performer accessing resources such as news about business opportunities, information about prices, labor availability and its cost, services and products, psychological

¹ Tom Yam restaurant in this study refers to Thai halal restaurants in the Malaysian society operated by Muslims from Thailand.

support, and capital. Immigrants constitute a crucial dimension for business construction and human resource management (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Werbner, 1990; Portes, 1995). Mars and Ward (1984) and Waldinger et al. (1990) in particular discuss the role of ethnicity as a resource for immigrant entrepreneurs in their destination countries, the trust given to one another and their access to capital from within the ethnic network. Werbner (1990) suggests that ethnic network members share their experiences with other members, help connect them with people outside their group and provide access to inexpensive and reliable labor, products and services.

Tom Yam Restaurants in Malaysia

The first Thai restaurant was established in Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s by Armad (pseudonym), a Thai-speaking Muslim originally from Hat Yai in Songkhla Province, Thailand (Bunmak, 2012, 2013). He immigrated to Malaysia to escape his financial problems and to improve his family's fortune. He decided to open a small family restaurant in Malaysia that sold Thai dishes, including Tom Yam soup made by his wife. Although he had attained higher education, Armad decided to run a restaurant in Malaysia because he believed that running a food business required only a small investment and involved little risk and not much technical skill (Bunmak, 2012, 2013).

At that time in Kuala Lumpur, there were no restaurants that sold Thai food; Malaysian Muslims were not familiar with Thai food, including Tom Yam soup. Thai food is quite different from Malay food, which is often cooked and then served cold, whereas Thai food is cooked and served immediately. Tom Yam soon became popular with Malaysian Muslims, and Tom Yam soup was the main dish served in Armad's restaurant; therefore, the restaurant was well patronized. This patronage led to the restaurant being called a "Tom Yam" restaurant, rather than a Thai restaurant, to attract Muslim Malaysian customers. Thai halal restaurants operated by Muslims from Thailand are now known as "Tom Yam restaurants" (Bunmak, 2012, 2013). Armad's business became increasingly successful. Within a year, he brought his young brother and two relatives from his hometown to work in his restaurant. They were also Thai Muslims from Songkhla Province, Thailand. After a year, all of them followed his lead and set up their own restaurants (Bunmak, 2012, 2013).

After a few years, two of Armad's friends in Malaysia who were Malaysian nationals with Melayu Muslim mothers and Malaysian Muslim fathers followed his lead and set up Thai restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. However, unlike Armad and his relatives, these friends were Melayu Muslims from Pattani Province, Thailand. Thus, although the first Thai restaurant was established in Kuala Lumpur by Thai Muslims, the business then diverged through Armad's social ties into two types of Tom Yam restaurants, those run by Thai Muslims and those run by Melayu Muslims who were Malay-speaking. Although both types of restaurant are run by Muslims from Thailand, the owners have different ethnic backgrounds and speak different languages (Bunmak, 2012, 2013). Today, there are many Tom Yam restaurants owned by Melayu Muslims in Malaysia (Rahimmula, 2008).

Research Methodology

To gain insight into the social world of immigrant entrepreneurs running Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia, a qualitative research methodology is best suited because the dynamic processes and people can be effectively understood in their own terms (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). So in-depth interviews were conducted with Thai Muslim and Melayu Muslim² immigrant entrepreneurs who were selected using the snowballing sampling

² Melayu Muslim in this paper refers to Malay people who speak the Malay dialect and have been living in the lower southern provinces of Thailand.

technique. In this way, 20 immigrant entrepreneurs were selected, 11 of whom were Melayu Muslims and 9 were Thai Muslims. The sampling frame, outlined below, was constructed and the interviewees were chosen from within it: 1) The research subjects were entrepreneurs employing other migrants in Malaysia. They were not workers obtaining daily or monthly wages from others. 2) They have run their Thai halal or Tom Yam restaurants in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor for at least two years. 3) Thailand is their country of origin, and they are Muslim.

Migration Patterns into Malaysia

Immigration to Malaysia is a real and obvious option for Thai people in Southern Thailand who wish to enhance their life's quality, earn for themselves and support their families. But making the decision to leave is quite a complex process, usually not the result of a singular cause. People often have several, sometimes conflicting, reasons for deciding to leave. Thai immigrant entrepreneurs were no exception, although they generally decided to migrate to Malaysia because they perceived more economic opportunities in this country. Nonetheless, they fall into two broad patterns: firstly, workers who migrated to find employment and subsequently started their own businesses, after working for their relatives or family members or after working for others who were not relatives; and secondly, those who were already entrepreneurs in Thailand seeking to establish new businesses in Malaysia.

A number of the research subjects started their life in Malaysia as employees, some working in the Tom Yam restaurants of their relatives or family members, or for non-relatives. They were not entrepreneurs before they moved, and they decided to migrate to take advantage of the higher wages and greater job opportunities offered in Malaysia compared with Thailand. The majority of them had completed compulsory education at government or Islamic schools but the chances for being employed in Thailand seemed restricted. Consequently, working in Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia was perceived as a good opportunity for them since higher wages were offered compared with those in Thailand. As one of them explained, "When I was my hometown [in Thailand], it was hard to find a job. My Malaysian friend persuaded me to go working in the State of Kedah as a worker in a restaurant first" [Mohamad, interview].

Fewer members of the sample were already entrepreneurs in Thailand who were seeking to make more money by establishing business in Malaysia. As one of them explained, "When I went the Malaysia, I already had one son, and my wife was a house wife. I then asked a friend of mine to help me find a restaurant shop, First, I found the first store opened in Kedah. After that, I had to find a new store which gained 3,000-4,000 baht per night. After only one year, I could move to the new restaurant" [Ruwaida, interview].

It is difficult for both workers and entrepreneurs to migrate to Malaysia if they are not connected to a migrant social network there, so the migrant social network from which they obtained constructive information on immigration before immigrating played a very significant part in their decision to leave. The sampling frame was constructed and the interviewees were chosen from within Tom Yam restaurants owners in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor but some sampling have run and worked restaurants in the Northern State of Malaysia before moving to Kuala Lumpur and Selangor as a chain migration. The members in the migrant social network from whom they gained such information were in various statuses. Some were family members and relatives, others were friends. Their network's members were former or current migrants some of whom were seeking employees to work in Malaysia. These people provided non-migrants and new migrants with useful information on immigration. So, it might be concluded that the main reasons for both workers and entrepreneurs to migrate to Malaysia were the pushing factors of the economic

constraints in Thailand and attracting factors of the economic opportunities in Malaysia. The bridge connecting the pushing factors to the attracting factors is the migrants' social network.

Immigrant Entrepreneurs of Tom Yam Restaurants in Malaysia

According to the results of the research in terms of the subjects' backgrounds, their experience backgrounds before being immigrant entrepreneurs in Malaysia could be categorized into three types as follows.

Work Experiences: When deciding to migrate, the desire of workers to become an entrepreneur or self-employed in Malaysia was a motivating factor for some. They saw their experiences as workers as a useful step in that process. These prepared them in terms of occupational aspects and developed their attitudes, skills and knowledge of such businesses, facilitating them in becoming entrepreneurs. According to one research subject,

"I used to be a waiter at a Thai restaurant owned by a Malaysian in Kedah, Malaysia. Being the waiter, my responsibility was to serve food and do other relevant kinds of work. Later, I worked as a chef helper. Being the chef helper, what I did was to read ordered menus to a chef and arrange dishes with food. When the restaurant was closed each day, I needed to list what to buy on the next day. At that time I just thought such the work was not that hard. That was why I decided to run my own restaurant" [Mahamdee, interviewed].

There were several people like this who started working as waiters, chef's helpers and chefs. As employees they were able to learn occupational practices and preparations, to informally and spontaneously gain the skills to manage Tom Yam restaurants, to form and develop their own entrepreneurship and to equip themselves with the human capital necessary to accomplish entrepreneurship. What they learned was adequate for them finally to own and run their own restaurants.

Family Support: Another finding of this research was that some of the subjects worked for relatives or family members who owned Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia. Some were paid while others worked for food and accommodation. One subject discusses her own experience, "My aunt persuaded me to work in Malaysia for I would be able to support my mother who needed money to take care of our family in Thailand. My aunt had a Thai restaurant in Malaysia and I worked with her. If there were many customers, I sometimes helped her take orders, serve food or even cook. The experience gained from the restaurant considerably encouraged me to dream of having my own one. I might sell a few types of dessert depending on my capability. I thought about it for a long time. I just wanted to have my own restaurant, probably starting with a small one. And I might sell something I used to sell. Having my own business is much better, I think" [Rotcharet, interviewed].

While working in the restaurants of relatives and families, besides learning basic skills in Tom Yam restaurant contexts, management skills were enhanced as well, even though some migrants were unpaid. Like the experiences they gained from working at others' Tom Yam restaurants, working with their relatives or family members improved their attitudes, skills and knowledge of the Tom Yam restaurant business. These were considerably beneficial for transforming them into the entrepreneurs.

Business Experience: Some of the subjects used to be the entrepreneurs in Thailand, with previous experience of running a restaurant business in Thailand and they remained entrepreneurs after their migration. Such people had no experience at working in or managing Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia but their intention was to become entrepreneurs there. Two cases are presented below. Armad and Ruwaida, both decided to own and manage Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia influenced by their previous entrepreneurial experiences in Thailand.

"After getting married, I have still worked as a driver for almost two years. Also, when I had free time, I helped my parents take care of our family's teahouse with such food types as tea, dessert and rice. The teahouse was opened in the morning like others. I remembered this

family's business has been run since I was young. I helped my parents at the teahouse for a long time, but I just started seriously helped them after getting married. This was approximately two years. I have learnt a lot out of this. When I reached Malaysia, my wife and I started having my restaurant in Kedah right away. I had to arrange and take care of everything. My wife was a chef. We had two employees, one was a waiter and the other was to make tea, coffee and other drinks. We first started with a small restaurant. My second restaurant was near downtown in Kuala Lumpur. I did not feel worried about anything. I believed that if our food was delicious, this would bring customers to us" [Armad, interviewed].

Similarly, Ruwaida never worked as a migrant worker in a Tom Yam restaurant in Malaysia but she used to be the owner of a restaurant in Thailand. She decided to migrate to Malaysia to start a Tom Yam restaurant here.

"I used to own a restaurant in Thailand. Even having my own business, I was still in debt. At that time, my third young sister married a Malaysian and opened a restaurant in Malaysia. I talked with my husband and decided to go and work there. I went there being pregnant with my youngest child. I asked my sixth younger sister who was unemployed to go there with me. My father's relatives were Malaysians. They helped us look for a location for setting up my restaurant. Finally, my younger brother-in-law found such a small location for me. I then was a restaurant owner again. My restaurant was not that big. I just wanted to run my own business. I did not want to be an employee" [Ruwaida, interviewed].

Most Muslims from the southern border provinces in Thailand who migrate to Malaysia work at Tom Yam restaurants there more than in any other business sector. This is because the skills necessary to work at the restaurants can be learnt on the job. Such work did not require pre-existing skills or expertise which could be learned by working in the restaurants.

Some migrant workers were motivated to take such work in the first place in order to learn how to become entrepreneurs. Others, after working for a while, were inspired enough by their employer's success to want to have their own business as Light and Bonacich et al. (1988) also found in their study of Korean workers in America.

The Use of Migrant Social Network Resources

Before migrating to Malaysia, the research subjects had connected with migrant social network members who were essential to their decision to move and facilitated their immigration process. Several network members, family, relatives, friends and employers, were themselves immigrant entrepreneurs or had been in the past. Importantly, the network helped the new entrepreneurs to gain access to economic and social resources in Malaysian three ways, by providing news and information, access to labour and capital.

News and Information: According to the result of the study, the research subjects needed significant and important information that was not readily available, such information provided by the network included knowledge of shops that were to be sold or rented. This information of the market in shops was not formally announced but mostly passed by word of mouth. Most successful entrepreneurs know that 'location is everything' for a population dense enough to provide a large number of customers for their restaurant is crucial to success. As one informant explained,

"My friend working in Malaysia suggested the location to me. It was an old and small restaurant. The landlord built the restaurant and arranged to rent it. I just had to decorate a few things" [Rotcharet, interviewed].

Migrant Labour: All the entrepreneurs interviewed in the study preferred to employ illegal migrants since they were a lot cheaper to employ than Malay citizens and have very few, if any, rights. Since the practice is illegal it must remain hidden, and there is no other way to

find these workers except by word of mouth. Sometimes this information was provided as a favour, sometimes it was paid for.

“My Thai relatives helped me look for employees. Sometimes I asked my neighbors to look for migrant workers for me. They would get payment for their help. This might not be a large amount of money, but I did not ask them to help me for free” [Faridah, interviewed].

Besides their network in Thailand, the entrepreneurs also had this kind of connection in Malaysia. Those being in the network in the destination country were not necessarily family members but could also be friends and employees. The case below is an example.

“In order to employ new migrant workers, I passed such information through word of mouth. My friends and my employees sometimes introduced the friends of theirs to me” [Ruslee, interviewed].

The Tom Yam restaurant businesses in Malaysia employ only Melayu Muslim and Thai Muslim migrants who mostly do not have the work permits required by the laws of Malaysia. This illegal employment, while making capital difficult to obtain, substantially reduces their labour costs because local Malaysian workers must be paid higher wages under the law, and because co-ethnic illegal migrants work longer hours, sometimes receiving only food and accommodation in return, and have no access to Malaysian welfare benefits.

Sources of Capital: To establish a business requires capital, and without it Melayu Muslim and Thai Muslim migrants in Malaysia have no chance of remaining or becoming entrepreneurs. To achieve this, the migrant social network was critical because they were generally not able to access funds from banks and other lending institutions. The respondents lacked financial security. They could not demonstrate that they had a stable financial status in Malaysia, few had Malaysian citizenship and some were working in Malaysia illegally. Accessing the financial resources of their network was far easier than accessing formal financial institutions.

Those migrants who were not entrepreneurs saved their wages with the intention to create their own businesses, and if this money was not sufficient, they borrowed the balance from their families and spouses.

“When deciding to have my own restaurant, I asked my parents to help me with money. I have not borrowed from anyone else. At that time, they gave me around 200,000 baht” [Faridah, interviewed].

Those who were already entrepreneurs were also financially supported by their families. In addition some, but not all of them, borrowed money from their friends, as in the following example.

“When I decided to run a Tom Yam restaurant in Malaysia, I borrowed some money from my family and from my friend. This friend and I used to work in the same restaurant. My first restaurant was at Kue Dor. I spent approximately 140,000 baht setting it up. As for my present restaurant, I spent my own money on the rent, the refurbishment and the deposit. This took about 170,000 baht” [Armad, interviewed].

The migrant social network of family, relatives and friends, which lent the entrepreneurs many tens of thousands of baht to establish their businesses, consisted of people of their own ethnicity in Malaysia. These investors were prepared to risk their capital in businesses which lacked financial security because of the personal and ethnic ties that united them, and in the reasonable hope of gaining a good return on their investment because of the cheap labour provided by co-ethnic migrants who are generally reliable and share their culture, language and values.

Ethnicity and Employment

The restaurant immigrant entrepreneurs in the sample are all Thai citizens and Muslims, but they come from two different ethnic groups. Their nationality and religion are the same, but

their language and culture are not. Thai Muslim migrant entrepreneurs speak the Southern Thai dialect as their mother tongue, whereas Melayu Muslim migrant entrepreneurs speak a Malay dialect. Each group usually employs co-ethnic workers rather than Indonesian or Malaysian workers. Melayu Muslim migrant entrepreneurs hire Melayu Muslim workers, whereas Thai Muslim migrant entrepreneurs employ only Thai Muslim workers, particularly workers who descend from a Malay tribe from the southern border provinces of Thailand, such as Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, as explained by two interviewees:

“I have both relatives and non-relatives who work here. There are fifteen employees in two restaurants; they are all from three southernmost provinces, Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala. Everyone is Melayu Muslim, speaks Malay. We use the same language, work with, and understand each other easily” [Russi, interviewed].

“Seven employees are both relatives and non-relatives, but everyone is Melayu, from the same hometown in Yala and Pattani, mostly from Pattani. Having Melayu employees, who are from the same hometown, makes things easy because we are one” [Sureena, interviewed]. This group of Thai Muslim migrant entrepreneurs is from Songkhla, Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat. They use the Southern Thai dialect in their daily life and strongly prefer to employ workers who are from the same place and who speak the same language. They are even very reluctant to employ Melayu Muslim workers, as indicated by the two following entrepreneurs:

“When they are all from the same hometown, I think we work more effectively. Melayu speakers [Melayu Muslims], are lazy, not like the Southern Thai dialect speakers [Thai Muslims] . . . I’ve employed some [Melayu Muslims], they also worked hard, but working with us [Thai Muslims] is better” [Roslinda, interviewed].

“I’ve never employed the people from the three southernmost provinces [Melayu Muslims]. They are tricky, awkward, problematic and un-teachable” [Hafizi, interviewed].

The Thai restaurant businesses in Malaysia employ only Melayu Muslim and Thai Muslim migrants who mostly do not have the work permits required by Malaysian law. This illegal employment, while making capital difficult to obtain, substantially reduces labor costs because local Malaysian workers must be paid higher wages according to the law and because co-ethnic illegal migrants work longer hours, sometimes receiving only food and accommodation in return, and have no access to Malaysian welfare benefits.

Discussion

This article aims to better understand immigrant entrepreneurs by examine the resources of their migrant social networks’ conducive to the construction of Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia. The question is, how do these Muslim migrants from Southern Thailand become immigrant entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The answer lies in their capacity to mobilize the resources of the migrant social networks that they inhabit, sustain and use.

The increase of dining out in Malaysia as the Malaysian economy grows the after 1970s New Economic plan, through many factors affecting this including an increasing amount of single households, more women are employed, unemployment rates and peoples’ disposable income rises and other related socio-economic changes (Bunmak, 2013). More Malaysian Muslims prefer to eat out. The consumption pattern of eating out in Malaysia is becoming more important for changes of lifestyle in the Malaysian society (N Zakaria, Mohd Zahari, Othman, Mat Noor, & Kutut, 2010; Bunmak, 2013). To satisfy their needs, the number of restaurants, including Tom Yam restaurants is growing. Today, there are many Tom Yam restaurants owned in Malaysia by Muslims from Southern Thailand (Rahimmula, 2008; Bunmak, 2013). A study conducted by N Zakaria et al. (2010) found that Thai food prepared by Muslims from Thailand was becoming more acceptable to Malaysians, and it was this

market niche that the entrepreneurs, in this study were seeking to fill with the support of their migrant social, religious and ethnic network.

There are two types of Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia. The first Tom Yam restaurants restaurant operated by Thai Muslims and those run by Melayu Muslims from Thailand (Bunmak, 2013). In addition, the owners of these restaurants continue to employ co-ethnic workers who have the same ethnicity and culture from Thailand. As in the study by Wu and Wang (2012), who found that an ethnic network in China's urban labor market searched among ethnic minority workers for entrepreneurs and reserved jobs for ethnic minority workers within their co-ethnic groups, this study found that immigrant entrepreneurs were likely to employ those of the same ethnicity as themselves; that is, Thai and Melayu Muslim entrepreneurs tended to employ their ethnic workers. The entrepreneurs and the workers relied on each other, creating a shared feeling of unity, whereas such feelings of reliability and trust were less strong between entrepreneurs and workers from different ethnicities. Because of this sense of dependability and obligation, Muslim entrepreneurs sought employees to work in their restaurants in Malaysia. Indeed, the employment of people from the same ethnic group was identified by the research respondents themselves as being one of their key business strategies.

There are many Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia operated by Muslim migrant entrepreneurs from Thailand both Thai Muslim and Melayu Muslim. These migrants become entrepreneurs in a foreign country which lies in the migrant social networks. Members of migrant social networks provide social and economic resources in Malaysia three ways, by providing news and information, access to labour and capital that they inhabit, sustain and use. As Massey et al. (1998) suggests that migrant social networks linkages to a form of social capital launch new entrepreneurs in small business. Migrant social networks play a significant role in the migratory process and immigrant entrepreneurialism. These networks represent a medium or meso level study linking explanations of personal relationships, which lie at the micro level, to social structure factors, which are considered to lie at the macro level. As Light (1984) had found in his research on ethnicity and immigrant workers in America, most of the entrepreneurs interviewed in this study had gained experience as employees in the restaurants of their family members or friends to improve their human capital in preparation for becoming immigrant entrepreneurs themselves. Their experiences as employees of co-ethnic business people trained them and gave them access to an extensive ethnically homogenous migrant social network. This enabled them to obtain investment capital, to develop successful business plans and practices, and eventually to hire co-ethnic workers themselves through the same migrant social network that had found employment for them.

Obviously the access to resources provided by their migrant social networks played a crucial role in business planning and success, as Werbner (1990) and Portes (1995) more recently. The immigrant entrepreneurs developed their personal relationships with others in the network that allowed each of them to access its resources. At the same time, commitment to the networks encouraged the migrants to develop their feelings of social belonging, unity, trust and reciprocity with their families, friends, relatives and friends. Marriage within the ethnic group helped expand the migrant social network qualitatively and quantitatively and extended opportunities to obtain more valuable resources.

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