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THE ROLE OF CHINESE MIGRANTS IN ACCELERATING BORDER CITY DEVELOPMENT

PERAN PENDATANG CHINA DALAM PERCEPATAN PEMBANGUNAN KOTA PERBATASAN

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ABSTRAK

Migrasi orang Cina ke Asia Tenggara telah menjadi isu besar belakangan ini. Studi ini mengkaji apakah semua pendatang Cina membawa dampak negatif bagi negara lain. Penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa pendatang Cina memiliki peran penting dalam mendukung pembangunan di daerah perbatasan, khususnya pembangunan ekonomi. Penelitian ini dilakukan di Mong Cai, kota perbatasan antara Vietnam dan Cina. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif sebagai metode penelitian, pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam dan studi pustaka. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa pendatang dari Cina membawa manfaat di kota Mong Cai, termasuk mendukung pembangunan kota dan meningkatkan ekonomi lokal.

Kata kunci: *Cina, Pembangunan, Perbatasan, Migrasi, Vietnam*

ABSTRACT

The migration of Chinese labours to Southeast Asian countries has become a huge issue lately. This study examines whether all Chinese migrants bring negative impacts to other countries. This research argues that Chinese migrants have a compelling part in support of development in the border area, particularly economic development. This research was conducted in Mong Cai, a border city between Vietnam and China. Using qualitative approach as methodology, the data are collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and review of the literature. The result found that Chinese migrants bring advantages in Mong Cai city, including support city development and improve the local economy.

Keywords: *Border, Chinese, Development, Migration, Vietnam*

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INTRODUCTION

Border cities in mainland Southeast Asia have unique characteristics since they have a direct land border with their neighbouring countries. Vietnam has direct border with China, Cambodia, and Laos. In the last decades, the fast-growing of China's economy has affected border development in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. However, the connectivity between China and Southeast Asian countries has already built since the initiative of Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). Tsuneishi (2005, p. 182) explained that, in 1992, GMS was introduced by the Asian Development Bank to establish the connectivity among countries through which the Mekong River passes, including Thailand and Vietnam, with South China. He also mentions that one of the highlights from the GMS projects was the improving connectivity of the GMS country members. This improving connectivity leads to the enhancement of trading activities, including in border cities through the creation of special economic zones. Border cities that were previously less developed and was positioned as the backyard of the country have changed. Now, border city is treated as the gate of the country and become the focus of development to attract more tourists and overseas labour.

The arrival of massive migrants turned border cities into more complex and heterogeneous places. Kuncoro (2013), in his thesis, mentioned that improving economy in the border areas following the implementation of the GMS program had attracted migrants from neighbouring countries and

also from other provinces who are in search of job opportunities, including the arrival of Chinese migrants to Southeast Asian countries. In the last couple of years, the issue of the massive influx of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia became highlights in many newspapers in Southeast Asia, e.g. "Chinese labour migration to Southeast Asia" (The ASEAN Post, 14 December 2018), "More Illegal Chinese workers in the Philippines" (The Straits Times, 2018), and "Chinese influx transforming Myanmar's quintessential city" (AP News, 1 May 2018). All those news affect the creation of stigmatisation among Chinese migrants.

In the case of Mong Cai, the migration among Chinese to Vietnam border city has been conducted for centuries. Previously, people who were living in the border area easily crossed the border to perform small scale trading activities. Then, after the normalisation in China, they have to arrange traveling papers from the local authority to cross the border. Having said that, the migration among people living in the border is a common phenomenon in Mong Cai, and since their neighbouring area is China, therefore the arrival of Chinese migrants is considered as something common and none of the residents worry much about this condition. This study argues that despite all the negative news about the arrival of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia countries, in the case of Mong Cai, the Chinese migrants contribute to the development of the city. Furthermore, this article examines the role of Chinese migrants for Mong Cai city development.

METHODOLOGY

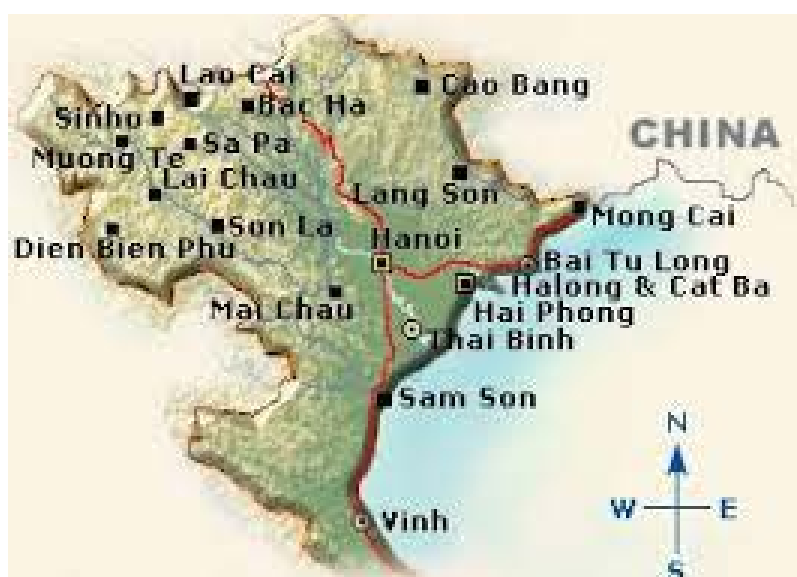
This study is part of the research about transnational migration and diaspora in border cities in Southeast Asia, funded by Research Centre for Regional Resources, Indonesian Institute of Sciences. This study used a qualitative approach through observation, in-depth interview, and literature review. The field research was conducted in Hanoi and Mong Cai in 2018. In-depth interviews with government officials, researchers, and academicians, as well as Chinese migrants in borders cities of Mong Cai were also conducted. In this study, Chinese migrants refer to commuters and temporary migrants (including contract workers and tourists).

Moreover, this research uses a place approach in migration study, where researchers visited Mong Cai and saw these places as host city or host country for the migrants. They did not trace the network of migrants or discover the condition of migrants from their homeland, therefore the

real condition of migrants in their homeland could not be portrayed precisely in this paper. They also acknowledge that due to the limited research time in Vietnam, this study was unable to capture the complexity of Mong Cai city. Also, they recognized the likelihood of missing or inaccuracy in the information collected due to translation and language barriers. However, this study will give a new portrait of Chinese migrants in Mong Cai border and how they have contributed to the city development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to [Christopher Hutton \(2000, 254\)](#), borders are defined as zones of transition. He also adds that the situation in border is complex in regard to political identity and territorial claims. [Moreover, Gielis \(2009, pp. 271–287\)](#) contends that borders have many meanings and functions, including political boundaries, physical barriers, and cultural expressions. Historically, [Donnan](#)



Source: Access Vietnam (2018)

Picture 1. Mong Cai Location in North-Eastern Vietnam

and Wilson (1998, p. 6) say that border mostly seen as a barrier to the movement of people, goods, ideas, and services. Although along the time, this perception has changed. Now, borders are also seen as a marker of the country and symbol of good relations with neighbouring countries.

The dynamic change is not only the perception related border itself, but also the growing of globalization around the world, market liberalization, and government policies influence the shift on the border area. Horstmann (2002) argues that globalisation has opened border areas for trade and investment activities, as well as facilitating the traffic of goods, capital, and people (Horstmann, 2002). In border area, the impact of globalisation such as trade and people movement became inevitable phenomenon. In border of Vietnam and China, this experience also happened, as Womack (1994, p. 495) pointed out that cross-border trade became the main trigger of economic development on this area.

As mentioned previously, globalisation is not only accelerating the trading connectivity, but also supporting people movement or migration. Sasiprapha (2010, p. 150) defines migration as the movement of people from one location to another; while those who move are well-known as migrants. Furthermore, he also explained that there are many types of migrants, including people who move from one city to another, refugees who cross the border of their country for protection, job seekers who move to other countries for better job opportunities, etc. For people who living

in the border area of the country and they migrate to other country, the migration can be called as cross-border migration or transnational migration. Chinh (2013, p. 21) pointed out that since the reopening of the Vietnam-China border in 1991, the mobility of Vietnamese migrants crossing to China has increased. Some look for jobs in China as a shopkeeper, salesman, agricultural worker and also for marriage. On the contrary, Chinese migrants also migrate to Vietnam to work as contract workers in Chinese companies in Vietnam.

According to Rabibhadana and Hayami (2013, pp. 244–245), there are three level analysis to understand about migration, namely macro, micro, and meso. The macro level understands structural conditions that make up the flow of migration, such as income inequality, uneven development, and state policies, while meso level is related to the social network connecting the origin with the destination. The network provides social capital and information that allows individual and agencies to choose the connection. Meanwhile, migration analysis at the micro level looks at agencies, passions, and expectations for migrants. Families become important actors in transnational migration as informers, guarantors, and supporters in the early days of migration.

Chinese Migrants in Border Cities

In this section, this study explains about the history of Chinese migrants in Mong Cai, who are the Chinese migrants and what they do in Mong Cai city. As background information, Hickerson (2012, p. 7) states that

Vietnam and China share a 2,363 km long borderline. Furthermore, Ngoc and Wang (2011, p. 35) state that Vietnam’s borderline goes across two Chinese provinces, Yunnan and Guang Xi, and seven Vietnamese provinces, namely Quang Ninh, Lang Son, Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Lai Chau, and Dien Bien. Mong Cai, the city on which this paper is focused, is located in Quang Ninh province.

Lam (2000, p. 377) mentioned that the migration of people from China to Vietnam has begun for more than 2000 years ago. Moreover, he stated that in the early twentieth century, when French colonised Vietnam, they need more labours to develop the infrastructure and this led to Chinese labours to come to Vietnam and work there. Besides, China also experienced chaos and discrimination, particularly for some ethnic minorities that also affect to emigration to Vietnam. At that time, Lam (2000) noted that around 18.000 Chinese were employed in Vietnam to build the Haipong-Kunming railway to connect North Vietnam with South China. The building of that railway took very long process from 1904–1941. As consequence, the number of Chinese migrants increased drastically.

However, after Vietnamese border war, China stopped their bilateral rela-

tionship with Vietnam from 1976 to 1990. At that time, China claimed there was no cross-border activity during war time, but local people (personal interview) in Mong Cai argued that they still maintained cross-border activity during that time through the forest route. The bilateral connection between two countries has rebuilt in 1991, after the normalisation of China. In support, one of the National Boundaries officials in Hanoi, Thi (personal interview, 30 March 2018), states that China and Vietnam started to restore their bilateral relation through rebuild border infrastructure and exchange people and goods in 1991. Since then, many Chinese come to Mong Cai city for business, work, trade, and pleasure. Some of them come from Dongxing city (the direct opposite city with Mong Cai) and commute to Mong Cai every day. Besides, there are also temporary Chinese migrants in Mong Cai, who mostly contract workers and businessmen. In general, there are two forms of contemporary Chinese migrants in Mong Cai, commuters and temporary migrants.

Figures released by Mong Cai People’s Committee from focus group discussion (FGD) shows that there was significant increase to the number of Chinese migrants in 2017. Based on their data, the number

Table 1. Number of Chinese Migrants Through Mong Cai Border Gate

Year	Number (in person)	Using passport (in person)
2016	4.634.690	1.212.391
2017	6.573.828	1.999.182

Source: Mong Cai General Statistic Office in Focus Group Discussion (2 April 2018)

rise around 150% than previous year. The same data also applied for people who travelled using passport. Besides, most Chinese migrants came to Mong Cai using travelling paper, an official letter for people living in the border area to do cross-border activities with some limitations, including reachable area, amount of goods and duration of visit. One of the informants mentioned that he should pay around VND25000 (around US\$1,1) to get the travelling paper. However, this data has limitation since the border officials did not survey whether the incoming Chinese want to do commute activities, temporary, or just passed by the border.

In general, [Duong, Bélanger, and Hong \(2005\)](#) argue that most of the Chinese migrants bring cheap consumer goods produced from southern Chinese provinces to Vietnam and bring back agricultural products to China. Large markets are established along the border, particularly on the Chinese side, as focal points for the trade. During research time, every morning when the border gate open at 7 am, there are a lot of people who came to the Vietnam side. They are Chinese commuters. Binh (personal interview, 28 March 2018) states that commuters are Chinese people who visit Mong Cai in the morning and will go back to Dongxing in the afternoon. Most of them are traders in Mong Cai central market. Based on the information in FGD on 2 April 2018, out of the 5.000 traders there, 1.000 of them were Chinese traders and all of them were commuters. However, Chinh (2013) mentioned that 90% kiosks in Mong Cai Trade Center were rented by Chinese

traders, but managed by Vietnamese. Therefore, the Mong Cai border market was dominated by Chinese sellers.

One of the Chinese sellers who commute every day, Anh (personal interview, 1 April 2018), said that he commutes every day from Dongxing city to central market in Mong Cai. He told the researcher that many Chinese traders in the market do commuting and mentioned that the number was more prominent than 20% of total traders in the market. Every day, he comes to Mong Cai Market when the border gate is open (he opens his shop around 7.30 AM) and returns to the Chinese side at 2 PM. His goods, especially women's clothing (including dresses), are from China and have decent quality. He has been doing this cross-border activity for seven years. Like most Chinese traders, he does not stay in Vietnam and prefers to stay in Dongxing because he has an uncle there and can live there to reduce his monthly spend. He uses travelling paper to cross the border and his travelling paper was valid for one

Besides commuters, there are also temporary Chinese migrants in Mong Cai. Some of them come for work and some as tourists. Temporary migrants are Chinese people who work in Mong Cai for several months based on a contract and also Chinese tourist who transit before coming to other part in Vietnam or before going back to China. Most of temporary migrants, including contract labours, Chinese businessmen, and seasonal workers, such as cross-border farming/aquaculture workers, only use travelling paper to work in Vietnam. Traveling



Source: Personal Documentation (1 April 2018)

Picture 2. Travelling Paper for Chinese Trader in Mong Cai

papers are border pass that can be used by local people in border areas and authorized by provincial police and valid for only 30 days. When the time length in 30 days is finished, a migrant can apply for three months traveling paper permit. Holding this traveling paper means they only can stay in the border city or go not more than 20 km from the border. As contract workers, the migrants are responsible for their official paperwork; most of the companies in Mong Cai did not help them to manage the working permit. They work as laborers in small factories, in farms, and other informal jobs. Nguyen (personal interview, 1 April 2018), one of the contract workers in Mong Cai, said that he and his friends are regularly returned to China after several months. Some of his friends also get married to local Vietnamese.

In fact, there are also illegal migrants from China in Mong Cai. However, their total number is hard to be measured. The government said that they could not handle this, even the border police officers. Numerous illegal tracks in the forest leading to the borders of Vietnam and China make the task of law enforcement even harder. Based on the Mong Cai people Committee Data, in 2010–2015, the China border police apprehended 1.016 illegal Vietnamese laborers heading to China. Vietnam, on the other hand, deported 1.897 illegal Chinese laborers. Ninh (personal interview, 1 April 2018), one of the drinks sellers in Mong Cai border market, said that there are some Chinese who illegally work in the farms near the forest. She also said that they work in the small home industries far from the city to avoid the police. Moreover, she stated that Vietnamese businessmen choose illegal

Chinese workers because they were cheap and hard-working.

Based on the explanation above, the Chinese migrants are not only referred to Chinese labour that mostly discussed in the media in the last couple years, but they are Chinese commuters and Chinese temporary migrants. Chinese labour is only a part of the migrants in Mong Cai city. Besides, from the immigration data, most of the migrants' use travelling paper to cross the Mong Cai border, means that most of Chinese migrants in Mong Cai are border residents who conduct daily activities.

Development of Border Cities

As explained above, Mong Cai experienced fast development since GMS agreement. This section explains about the development of Mong Cai city and the impact of the development. In the last decade, Mong Cai has witnessed rapid development and thus became the centre of trade in northeast Vietnam. [Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in Linh \(2012\)](#) states that

“building Mong Cai to become a modern international border-gate city plays an important role in developing the coastal economic belt which links Quang Ninh with Red River Delta provinces and connects Quang Ninh with Guangxi province of China, boosting trade, investment and tourism between Vietnam with China and ASEAN bloc to have mutual benefits and development.”

Having said that, the prime Minister clearly show that Mong Cai has an important role for the border area in North Vietnam.

There are two reasons behind the rapid development in Mong Cai. First, Mong Cai being developed is due to its strategic location. Situated in the northeast of northern Quang Ninh province, it holds a prominent position in terms of politics, economy, and national defence. It also serves as Vietnam's gateway to China and ASEAN countries. A China-ASEAN free trade area, two economic corridors, and one economic belt between Vietnam and China are on the making. With a 78-kilometre-long border shared with China, Mong Cai is gradually becoming a large financial centre in commercial transactions with China and is defined as a key gateway for Vietnam's international economic integration process. Binh (personal interview, 28 March 2018) mentioned that Mong Cai experienced bustling growth because of five reasons.

“Mong Cai has the most comfortable bridge for people to cross the border, Mong Cai is more developed and has a strong tradition of economic exchange, Mong Cai is mostly doing trade and transporting on goods, Mong Cai is the most dynamic border economic market, most concentrate on transporting the goods to other provinces, also more and more Chinese companies come to Mong Cai to transport the goods from China on a big scale.”

Second, the Mong Cai development is inseparable from the development of its neighbouring city, Dongxing (China), and

China's growing economy. Binh (personal interview, 28 March 2018) states that as a border city, Mong Cai has developed very well because the infrastructures the Vietnamese government improved help ease the movement of goods and people from China to Vietnam and vice versa. The China's economic development also led the increasing number of tourists who passed through Mong Cai border gate. The efforts from both countries aim at attracting more investors and tourists, who are hoped to help make the local and trans-border economy better. Based on the data in [Linh \(2012\)](#), Mong Cai's economic growth summarises the rapid development perfectly. This growth can be seen through the increase in GDP. [Linh \(2012\)](#) stated that in 2015 its GDP was US\$1500, around 14,5% higher than that of the previous year.

Furthermore, the development in Mong Cai also bring advantages for the city itself, infrastructure development, for example, attracts more tourists to come to the city, especially Chinese. When researcher visit Mong Cai border market and Mong Cai duty-free shop, there are a lot of Chinese tourists there. The location of Mong Cai is next to Ha Long province, where the famous Ha Long Bay is located. Therefore, Chinese tourists who want to go there through land road must pass Mong Cai. Mong Cai becomes a transit city for Chinese tourists. Some tourists stop by during their return trip to China, while some prefer to spend one or two days in Mong Cai to explore the city. To accommodate the influx of Chinese tourist, many local people in Mong Cai can

speak Chinese. Yung (personal interview, 1 April 2018), one of the fruit sellers, said that she learned and practice Chinese every day in the last five years. Speaking Chinese allows them to sell their goods better than their friends who could not speak Chinese.

The incoming tourist also bring domino effect, especially for service sector in Mong Cai. Karaoke, hotel and restaurants in Mong Cai are service sectors that heavily supported by tourists. Karaoke is a top-rated business in Mong Cai. There are numerous karaoke venues around the city and most of those places are fully booked by Chinese in the weekend. One of the informants also said that karaoke in Mong Cai is the most advanced karaoke in Vietnam. One of researcher's hotel staff said that usually Chinese tourist would spend two nights at the weekend to do karaoke and stay at the hotel with lady escorts. [Anh \(2006, p. 64\)](#) mentioned in his article that Mong Cai was one of prostitution hot spot in Vietnam. Most of the prostitutes work in restaurants, café, karaoke bars, guest house, massage, and salon. Since prostitution is covert in Vietnam, it is hard to be determined, only local people and particular tour agent that know exactly the place for prostitution. Besides, [Anh \(2006, p.79\)](#) also said that there was high demand in Vietnam that Chinese men looking for virgin girls as prostitutes since they believe that having sex with virgin girls will bring luck for their business.

Another positive impact of city development is the increasing investment and collaboration among Chinese business people, government, and local people.

One of the examples of good collaboration investment in Mong Cai is the opening of a dry inland port. [Roso and Lumsden \(2009\)](#) define the dry inland port as an inland intermodal terminal directly connect with road or rail to a seaport and operating as a transit point for transshipment. The dry inland port in Mong Cai is called the ICD Pontoon bridge which is aimed at fisheries and agriculture export-import activities. It is hoped that by using this bridge, the fisheries and agriculture products can be transported in a shorter time and it can improve the quality of the products. The leading investor for ICD construction is a Chinese businessman, but he collaborates with a big Vietnam company, and the local government will arrange the management of the seaport. This collaboration is a very interesting example of how the private sector, foreign investors, and local government collaborate to support the cross-border trade.

The expansion of multinational corporations, such as Samsung in Vietnam, is another highlight of the development impact. Since the economy in China is growing significantly in the last decade, many multinational corporations move their companies to Vietnam because of the cheap labour. As a result, to enhance the distribution of the products, the company needs to take the shortest route between producing place to marketing place. In this case, from Hanoi to Hongkong, therefore Mong Cai is one of the shortest routes to be taken. Inside China (2016) reports that it takes 14 hours to travel from Hanoi to Hong Kong by land transportation and the fee for 45-foot con-

tainer size was only RMB30.000 (around US\$4.000). Therefore, the development of border city also supports national economic development and other supporting industry, including transportation business.

However, along with China's fast-growing economy and the improvement of access between two border cities, there are some challenges for Vietnamese, especially for people who live in the border area. One of the informants, Cung (personal interview, 29 March 2018), mentioned that China performed what he called 'Chinese arts' which means that China has ultimate control to open and close the border. There was a time when China suddenly close the border for several days, and Vietnamese business people could not bring their agriculture and fisheries products. As a result, their products became rotten, and they forced to reduce their product's price. He adds that this phenomenon was not only occurred in Mong Cai but also other border cities in Vietnam. Although the dependency of Vietnamese business is high towards China, the big market and demand in China become their only chance to increase the trade values. Therefore, Vietnamese people in business and local border people still put high expectation from cross-border trade with China.

Another challenge that has to be faced by the Vietnam government is related to the free trade agreement. The Free Trade Agreement between China and ASEAN, indeed, accelerates China's trade in Southeast Asia. In Mong Cai, the bilateral trade between China and Vietnam mostly dom-



Source: Personal Documentation (29 March 2018)

Picture 3. ICD Pontoon Bridge in Mong Cai

inated by seafood, agriculture, and heavy industry. To some extent, this can be seen as a good sign that people in Southeast Asian can access China's product easily and at an affordable price. However, a massive influx of Chinese products also can be seen as a treat for local industries, since they can compete with China's price. It takes two to tango in terms of trade.

In general, the fast development of Mong Cai is caused by the strategic location of Mong Cai itself and also the development and increasing economy of China. China has a major role in supporting the economy of Mong Cai since they support infrastructure development, the growing number of tourists, and an investment. Although there are some challenges concerning China's characteristics, Mong Cai still sees China as a potential business partner and source of capital for border city.

The Role of Chinese Migrants in Border Development

[Pieke and Speelman \(2013, p.13\)](#) argue that the 'going out' strategy led to the arrival of Chinese migrants in Vietnam. Its policy is associated mostly with the Ministry of Commerce, whose profile in China's international involvement has risen steadily in the 1990s and 2000s. As the main ministry dealing with international economic cooperation, the Ministry of Commerce is at the center of labour export policy, which is ultimately about its contribution to the Chinese economy.

In Mong Cai, the increasing number of Chinese tourists was unknown. But, the number of incoming Chinese migrants can be seen in Table 1 above. However, the data represented all migrants, including tourists, contract workers, and commuters, but there is no exact number of tourists there. Tourism has a significant contribution to Mong

Cai's economics. One of the visible contributions from the incoming Chinese tourists is showed from the visa fee earning. [Xinhua \(2017\)](#) reported that Mong Cai collected 12,5 million US dollars from the visa fee in 2016 and the number increase to 85% to be more than 22 million US dollars in 2017. Besides, tourists also attract taxes. [Vietnam Economic News \(2019\)](#) also states that in the first ten months of 2019, tourism paid around VND 90 billion, up to three percent from the previous year. Based on this data, the Chinese tourist contributes to Mong Cai's economic development, particularly through visa fees and tourism tax.

As explained above that in both border cities, most of the Chinese migrants are involved in trading activities, such as small-scale traders, hotel and restaurant owners, travel agents, and even workers in small industries. Some migrants came as a pioneer for their own business, while some use their ethnic networking to do joint business and to get a business permit. Although there is no published data about the number of Chinese business people or traders in Mong Cai, Wu stated that most business people and traders in Mong Cai were Chinese ([Grillot, 2013, p.398](#)). Most of them engage in small-scale trade and tourism-related industries, such as hotel, travel agent, restaurant, and karaoke. As observed, the growing of five stars hotels, karaoke, and restaurants in Mong Cai is extensive. Most of the workers can speak Vietnamese and Chinese to accommodate the massive of Chinese customers.

In detail, the contribution of Chinese businessmen can be seen from the volume of trade in Mong Cai border below.

Table 2. Trade Volume in Mong Cai Border Gate

Year	Amount (US\$)
2007	2,4 billion
2008	4,1 billion

Source: Halong Bay (2012)

Based on the data above, it can be seen that the volume of trade in Mong Cai increase almost double only in one year in 2008. It means that trading activities was very active and promising for the future of Mong Cai city. Besides, Chinese migrants play major role in export import trading in Mong Cai. Inside China (2016) described that, in 2013, Dongxing, a city in China that directly opposed with Mong Cai, imported around 200.000 tonnes of marine products (more than 100 containers) from Vietnam through Mong Cai. While in 2014, around 1.600 million tonnes of fruits were exported and imported from Vietnam via land border. Marines products and fruits are main products of export import in Mong Cai city.

Another visible data that can show the contribution of Chinese migrants can be seen from the tax revenue data. In 2008, the amount of tax revenue in Mong Cai city increase around 150% from the previous year, meaning that the incoming of migrants, through tourism, business, investment, and other sectors contribute significantly for the economics of Mong Cai.

Table 3. Tax Revenue in Mong Cai

Year	Amount (VND)
2007	1.100 billion
2008	1.700 billion

Source: Halong Bay (2012)

In addition, with the total amount of tax revenue as 1.700 billion VND made Mong Cai received third rank in national level. This number is very high for the district level, such as Mong Cai.

Based on the observation and FGD, the research team did not find any meaningful resentment from local people to the migrants in Mong Cai. One of the participants mentioned that there was no competition between local people and migrants. They believe that both parties have equal participation in the development of border areas. [Vietnam Economic News \(2014\)](#) reported that one of the Chinese traders in Mong Cai market said, *“I have been engaged in trading activities in Mong Cai for decades. I find everything here is good and favourable. People here are very friendly”*. In support, Vice President of Mong Cai city council, Le Ngoc Lieu, also said, *“Vietnamese is very friendly, and they don’t discriminate. Chinese also obey with Vietnam rules and make the situation in the border stable and peaceful”*. Besides, some people also believe that people in Southern China shared the same ethnicity and roots and treat them as relatives. Cung (personal interview, 29 March 2018) also states that there were also Vietnamese who work and stay in China’s side. One of the informants from national boundary staff also mentioned that the Vietnamese government has an agreement with

China to send Vietnamese to work there as part of a border agreement. Therefore, the arrival of migrants in border cities can be seen as an ordinary phenomenon for people living in border areas.

Although many people have a negative stigma on the arrival of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asian countries, in the case of Mong Cai border city, the influx of Chinese migrants give more benefits rather than drawbacks for local people. They boost the local economy through trading and tourism. Besides, since they live in the border area, the connection among people living there are strong for centuries. Vietnamese living in Mong Cai also see them like their neighbours and they do not worry about the competition, especially related to job opportunity and trade. The relationship among people in the Mong Cai city is fluid and peaceful.

The researcher acknowledges that this study has a limitation. This study only captures the small feature of Chinese migrants in Mong Cai. However, the complexity of Chinese migrants, in general, is still need to research further. It is suggested for other scholars to explore more on the dynamic relationship between both countries, and their impact on the relationship between migrants and local people also interesting to explore more. It is hoped that this initial study can encourage more scholars, especially those who focus on Vietnamese and border studies, to conduct further elaborative research in this area.

EPILOGUE

The border cities in Southeast Asia mainland have already begun to develop since the initiative of GMS by the Asian Development Bank. This initiative tried to change the paradigm that the border is not the backyard of the country, but the entry gate; therefore, the development of the border should be prioritized. In the case of Mong Cai, a border city between Vietnam and China, border development had significantly started after the normalisation in China in 1991. Previously, Mong Cai was an underdeveloped city, especially after China closed the border and stopped the bilateral relationship after the Vietnam war (1976–1990). The development of Mong Cai became promising after the massive economic growth in China and the initiation of infrastructure development. Mong Cai became a gateway between Vietnam with China and ASEAN countries, which are in the process of forming a China-ASEAN free trade area and develop two economic corridors and one economic belt between Vietnam and China.

In general, there are two main groups of Chinese migrants in the border of Mong Cai, commuter and temporary migrants. Commuters are dominated by Chinese traders who conduct trading activities in the Mong Cai border market. They come every morning and will return to the China side in the afternoon, while temporary migrants are tourists or workers from China who are living for some time just to transit or have contract work in Mong Cai. There are also some illegal

migrants in Mong Cai. However, the number is unidentified. The statistic data showed that most of the Chinese migrants in Mong Cai are people who live in the border area or from Guangxi province in China since they do not need a passport to cross the border and only use traveling paper. Therefore, their arrival to Mong Cai is considered a common phenomenon for locals, since they have a long relationship for centuries.

After the re-establishment of bilateral relations with China, Mong Cai experienced massive development. The strategic location of Mong Cai as bridging between China and other Southeast Asian countries become the main reason behind the infrastructure development there. Besides, the rising economy in China also influences Chinese people to invest, travel, and trade in Mong Cai city. The incoming Chinese tourists also brought domino effects to the development in Mong Cai since tourists need more hotels, restaurants, and other facilities that can absorb investment and open employment opportunities for local people. Besides, the infrastructure development such as road improvement also helps to reduce the duration time of distribution and fee for logistic industry and in the end, will support the industry in the capital city like Hanoi. It shows that the development in Mong Cai brings two effects, first attract more industries to develop, including tourism, service, and logistic. Second, infrastructure development also supports the Mong Cai city to grow more in all sectors.

Related to the role of Chinese migrants in Mong Cai, it is clearly seen based on the observation, interview and focus group discussion with local people, officials and migrants itself that the arrival of Chinese migrants in the

border of Vietnam give mutual benefit for local people, particularly regarding the economy. As tourists, they contribute to the local economy of Mong Cai, as can be seen through tax revenue and the visa fee. As traders, Chinese business people contribute through the volume of trade and export-import amount that increases significantly from year to year. In general, the Chinese migrants have made Mong Cai become a vibrant and dynamic city through economic development. Besides, their existence in Mong Cai is not considered as a threatening situation for local people since they have connected since centuries, and Vietnamese count them as neighbours rather than as foreigners. All in all, in Mong Cai's case, Chinese migrants support border city development and improve the local economy.

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