

In 1966, Everett Lee argued that global migration took place among rational thinkers to better their lives. He took an economic-centered approach to migration, arguing that these cost-benefit analyses migrants make are the determinant of migration. In addition, Lee also argued that distance inversely affects the scope of migration. In his view, traveling longer distances costs more and carries more risk, so fewer people would travel long distances. In Southeast Asia, most migration is for economic purposes, whether through work programs sponsored by the government or in search of a better financial future. Today, Southeast Asia's migration patterns follow the economic theory, for the region's migration is caused by a series of socio-economic cost-benefit analyses. However, there are exceptions, most notably concerning Lee's ideas on distance.

Lee's theory focuses on cost-benefit analyses, and migrating for economic gain is prevalent in Southeast Asia. Indonesia and the Philippines, for instance, both have migrant work programs.¹ These programs encourage residents to move abroad and work temporarily, and working abroad generates income for themselves and their governments through remittances. The increased revenue encourages the governments to continue these programs pushing people abroad for work.

The Philippines is one nation that prioritizes work migration, and there are many directions potential migrants can pursue to work abroad. Most prominently, agencies known as Private Recruitment Agencies facilitate migrant work, and the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration's Government Placement Branch also opens avenues for migration.² Migrants

¹ Maruja M.B. Asis et al., "The Philippines–Korea and Philippines–Taiwan Migration Corridors: A Comparison of Recruitment Systems and Their Outcomes*," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 470-1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0117196819898069>.

² Asis et al., "The Philippines–Korea and Philippines–Taiwan Migration Corridors," 470-1.

can also find temporary overseas work opportunities on their own without the help of these organizations. Having all these options pushes migrants to work overseas to better their economic position. These programs make it much simpler and easier to migrate for work purposes, even if it is only for a set time. Similarly, Indonesia has programs to facilitate migration, albeit not as prominently as the Philippines' programs. Instead, organizations in Indonesia focus on enticing people to migrate and facilitating that migration. Moreover, social networks provide more information streams to Indonesians, further assisting these work programs.³ Access to information is crucial, for it gives the possible migrant a way to see the outside world, whether that be accurate or misinformed.

Thus, migration from areas of Southeast Asia happens for a variety of reasons, from direct economic incentives provided by the state to an information flow that favors migration. However, all cases show a cost-benefit analysis occurring in the mind of the migrant, with different factors influencing their decisions. Moreover, information streams give the idea of more economic opportunities elsewhere, moving people looking for work who use these streams.

While there are ways countries facilitate emigration, there are also multiple “pull factors” that try to draw immigrants into a country. By definition, pull factors attempt to make the destination more attractive to the migrant. Most of the reasoning behind promoting migration is economic; migrant workers are cheaper than domestic workers, allowing companies to cut labor costs and fill labor shortages. Two countries where this is prevalent are Taiwan and South Korea, which both have agreements with other governments to fill their work vacancies.⁴

³ Ernst Spaan and Ton van Naerssen, “Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia–Malaysia Corridor,” *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 44, no. 4 (March 15, 2018): 686-7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315523>.

⁴ Asis et al., “The Philippines–Korea and Philippines–Taiwan Migration Corridors,” 471-2.

Another nation that has similar reasons for encouraging immigration is Singapore, whose immigrant population is 37% of its total population due to its high use of pull factors.⁵ It needs these migrants to counteract its low birth rate and fill positions more effectively. Singapore also increasingly needs more highly-skilled workers for its jobs, so it has pursued initiatives to actively recruit workers from what it refers to as nontraditional countries.⁶ This policy allows Singapore to offer the most pull for these workers, offering them a higher-paying position in return for their services. This offer, in turn, encourages workers to immigrate to Singapore. Another reason Singapore attempts to attract migrants is to cut costs, for international migrant workers cost less than domestic workers.

Similarly, both Taiwan and Malaysia⁷ also work to attract workers to fill labor shortages. Specifically, Taiwan uses the migrant work agreements it has with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia to source migrant labor.⁸ In all cases, countries try to make themselves available and appealing to all looking to work abroad to attract more immigrants. The usage of pull factors correlates heavily with Lee's economic theory of cost-benefit analysis—destinations are attempting to increase the perceived benefits of migration.

Moreover, there is a clear correlation between a country's ranking on the Global Competitiveness Index and its net migration rate. Singapore is globally third place on the index and has the highest net migration rate in Southeast Asia.⁹ Likewise, Malaysia and Thailand have the second and third highest net migration rates, and subsequently, both are second and third highest on the GCI in Southeast Asia. Inversely, Laos and Cambodia are the lowest two

⁵ Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Theodora Lam, "Immigration and Its (Dis)Contents: The Challenges of Highly Skilled Migration in Globalizing Singapore," *American Behavioral Scientist* 60, no. 5–6 (May 1, 2016): 638, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216632831>.

⁶ Yeoh and Lam, "Immigration and Its (Dis)Contents," 643.

⁷ Spaan and van Naerssen, "Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia–Malaysia Corridor," 680–1.

⁸ Asis et al., "The Philippines–Korea and Philippines–Taiwan Migration Corridors," 471.

⁹ "Competitiveness Rankings," *Global Competitiveness Index 2017–2018*, <http://wef.ch/2wcVUt8>.

Southeast Asian nations on the GCI, and both also have the lowest net migration rates in the region.^{10 11}

Therefore, if a nation has a higher GCI, it will generally have a higher net migration rate. Moreover, the GCI itself can be used as a pull factor for a country, as migrants may see this statistic and change their view of that country due to the ability to compete for a better wage or job, which can draw them to that nation. So, the GCI is a metric that indicates a nation's economic strength, which can be used to entice migrants. Therefore, Lee's idea of pull factors holds in this case, for nations that need workers will try to use their competitiveness and their economic opportunities to further entice migrants.

Another major part of Lee's theory is that distance is inversely related to the likelihood of migrating there. For instance, someone would be less inclined to migrate to the Netherlands from El Salvador than the United States. The effect of distance on migration is due to the cost of travel and how well the migrant may fit in with the culture. In Southeast Asia, the distance theory is somewhat true; there are many examples to support Lee, but there are also examples that reject this theory.

The Malay-Indonesian migration corridor is a prime example of a shorter distance permitting more migration. Malaysia and Indonesia border each other on the island of Borneo, which is a porous border so people can cross without papers.¹² Having such open borders makes it incredibly easy for migrants to move back and forth between countries, especially when there is a need for work in Malaysia. Thus, for migrants that want to leave Indonesia, Malaysia is an obvious destination. There are relatively low costs, nearly no barriers to entry, and possible work

¹⁰ "Competitiveness Rankings."

¹¹ "UNdata | Record View | Net Migration Rate (per 1,000 Population)," <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=migration&d=PopDiv&f=variableID%3a85>.

¹² Spaan and van Naerssen, "Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia–Malaysia Corridor," 687-90.

opportunities. Therefore, it is not surprising that Malaysia receives over 1.2 million migrants from Indonesia, making Indonesia the largest sender of migrants to Malaysia.¹³

The pattern of low barriers and closeness increasing the migration rate is not just limited to Malaysia and Indonesia. In many cases, lower barriers yield more migration. Timor-Leste has most of its migration flowing to and from Indonesia, which it shares a border with, and Australia, which is less than 800 kilometers away across the Timor Sea.¹⁴ Just like Malaysia, Timorians have two easy ways to leave their country—either across the sea to Australia or through a land border to a part of Indonesia that very closely resembles Timor-Leste. In the migrant's mind, they get the most benefit for the least cost. From this, it can be determined that distance is simply a part of the cost in the cost-benefit analysis. Traveling has a non-insignificant cost, whether that be money, time, culture shock, or risk. The easiest way to reduce costs is to move somewhere close to and similar to the migrant's home nation; then, the migrant does not need to travel far and will not have much of a culture shock. In addition, Indonesia and the Philippines reduce this cost by providing work programs to allow migrants to work in places such as Taiwan. Their help facilitates migration along these corridors and reduces the cost and danger for migrants to work overseas.

From this, we can determine that in Southeast Asia, the cost of moving far away is a significant factor, which, alongside the previous examples, can also be seen in both Singapore and Thailand. Both take economic and social migrants from around Southeast Asia, and they are very centric,¹⁵ with Singapore being at the end of the Malay Peninsula and Thailand being in the

¹³ “United Nations Population Division | Department of Economic and Social Affairs,” <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/countryprofiles.asp>.

¹⁴ “Immigrant and Emigrant Populations by Country of Origin and Destination,” migrationpolicy.org, February 10, 2014, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/immigrant-and-emigrant-populations-country-origin-and-destination>.

¹⁵ “Interactive World Migration Report 2022,” <https://www.iom.int/wmr/interactive>.

center of mainland Southeast Asia, between Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Both nations' central positions make it easy for migrants to immigrate to both nations, and their economic competitiveness also acts as a further pull factor. As seen with the Indonesian-Malaysia corridor, bordering nations make it easy to move between countries. The idea of geographical centrality positively affecting migration is further evidenced by Singapore having over 1.1 million Malay migrants in 2020. Singapore also has substantial numbers from the rest of South and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Hence, it can seemingly be concluded that cost is a determining factor in the mental calculus of migrants. The farther away a nation is, the less likely one is to migrate to that nation. Instead, migrants prefer closer destinations with more porous borders, like Malaysians going to Singapore or Indonesians going to Malaysia. However, this is not entirely the case, as several examples break this rule.

While distance is a factor in the cost of migration, it does not mean that a further distance will mean less migration. For example, Filipino work migrants go to Taiwan and South Korea, the latter being over 2500 kilometers away.¹⁷ When nations that actively seek workers are closer, it seems confusing why migrants would go elsewhere. One influence on this migration pattern is the Philippines' work migration plan, which moves migrants to Taiwan and South Korea, lowering the barrier for migrants to work there. Moreover, South Korea has similar labor shortages to other nations in Southeast Asia, which also yield the need for low-wage workers. Hence, Filipinos can work in South Korea and get a job there, with a large amount of the process facilitated by the government. This migration stream contradicts Lee's theory, though, for if the distance factor is taken strictly—that being that any distance reduces the chance of migrating there—it is nonsensical that Filipinos would move 2500 kilometers away for work.

¹⁶“The World Migration Report 2020,” <https://www.iom.int/wmr/interactive>.

¹⁷ Asis et al., “The Philippines–Korea and Philippines–Taiwan Migration Corridors,” 471.

Lee's theory is further contradicted by a different case—The United States and Canada are both major destinations for Filipino and Vietnamese migrants.¹⁸ Work programs supported by the government do not go to either nation, though; instead, these emigrants must make their way to these nations without government support. However, there is a possible reason for this migration stream, for both destinations have a high likelihood of careers, and both rank high in economic competitiveness. Moreover, the United States formally colonized the Philippines, giving it historical ties.

One final example disproving a rigid interpretation of Lee's theory is that Indonesians tend to emigrate to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁹ In this case, Saudis and Emiratis are much more culturally similar than the origin countries due to both nations being predominantly Muslim, much like Indonesia. Both nations are a continent away from Indonesia, making it more difficult to move. However, there is less culture shock than the migration streams from Vietnam and the Philippines to the United States and Canada

Thus, Lee's theory regarding distance is too simplistic. While there are plenty of examples where the chance of migration is inversely related to the distance traveled, there are also many examples where geographical distance does not affect the likelihood of migration. Instead, it is vital to consider this distance relationship as a factor in migration, although not a determining factor. In the cost-benefit analysis of migration, distance adds to cost, whether through the monetary cost of travel or the culture shock of being somewhere not like where the migrant originated. Tweaking Lee's theory to lessen the severity of distance's effect on migration explains both country-sponsored migration to somewhere far away and examples where the benefit outweighs the cost.

¹⁸ "Interactive World Migration Report 2022."

¹⁹ "Interactive World Migration Report 2022."

However, there are other issues with Lee's theory in Southeast Asia. For instance, one of the largest possible issues is the so-called "culture of migration", where if there is a tradition of working abroad in a nation, people from that nation are inherently more likely to migrate for work.²⁰ Migration culture is not factored into the theory, as it is neither a cost nor a benefit, but it affects the decision to emigrate nonetheless.

Another complicating factor in the economic theory of migration is the lack of acknowledgment of opposition to economic migration. To Lee, this should not happen, as migration economically benefits destinations. In Singapore, pushback to migration happens due to increased job competition, especially if the careers are highly competitive.²¹ Using this reasoning, it is rational that some would oppose economic migration, for an increase in the number of available workers makes it more difficult for people to get jobs. Lee does not consider this; to him, economic migration helps a nation, and it is thus irrational to oppose it.

Thus, Lee's theory can explain most of the migration in Southeast Asia. In this region, migrants move mostly for economic reasons. They look for work opportunities and an improvement in their economic standing. Moreover, states such as the Philippines and Indonesia facilitate this movement of migrants for work, as it gives them benefits through remittances. On the other side of the migration stream, receiving countries try to attract economic migrants to suit their needs in the workforce. In Singapore, low birth rates cause a need for immigration to fill shortages. Moreover, as Singapore further develops, this general need has further moved to a need for highly-skilled workers. However, that is not the only reason countries seek migrant work; low-wage migrants are vital for nations that want to cut costs.

²⁰ Spaan and van Naerssen, "Migration Decision-Making and Migration Industry in the Indonesia–Malaysia Corridor," 684.

²¹ Yeoh and Lam, "Immigration and Its (Dis)Contents," 648.

While Lee's theory explains migration for economic purposes, it fails to acknowledge culture's role in migration. The distance can increase the cost of migration, but similar cultures make migration a more viable possibility, explaining why countries like Indonesia have high emigration rates to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, the economic theory fails to account for resistance to economic migration; people have cultural and economic reasons for opposing migration, and Lee does not consider this issue. Hence, while Lee can explain most migration in the region, culture, distance, and opposition are issues with his theory.

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