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# CHOOSING A DESTINATION FOR WORKING ABROAD: THE CASE OF LABOR EXPORT FROM PHU THO PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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## Abstract

Labor export is now considered one of the foreign economic activities which bring great benefits to socio-economic development in Vietnam. With remittances from this activity up to billions of USD a year, it has helped thousands of households to stabilize their livelihoods and renewed rural communities. This study uncovers the factors affecting the decision to export labor of workers from Phu Tho [1]. Sociocultural elements including individuals, expected markets, orientations from family and friends, and cost factors were all compared to assess decision-making to export labor. Results are based on descriptive statistical methods and regression analysis. Japan was widely considered an optimal target destination. As the Japanese economy continues to open and further demands foreign laborers, suggestions on how to better prepare Vietnamese workers to utilize this opportunity are posited.

**Keywords:** Labor export, rural workers, remittances, Phu Tho province.

## 1. Introduction

There has been a long tradition of research on migration issues in the development literature [2]. Research has highlighted the methodological issues in estimating the role of migration networks in actual flows, and in evaluating the effect of migration on economic well-being. Recent research has sought to identify the main factors influencing the choice of migration destination. Munshi (2003) and Beaman (2006) have shown that social networks play a role in finding

employment. Migrants may also value social interaction with neighbors and friends [3, 4]. This point was also noted by Stark and Taylor [5], who do not consider relative deprivation in the migrant's destination but show that households' relative deprivation in their village of origin is significant in explaining migration to destinations where the returns are high. More recent work in economics and psychology has shown that subjective well-being depends on relative achievement, of which one dimension is income [6, 7].

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The export of labor is an important external economic activity for many countries in the global south. In Vietnam, for example, 2019 was the fifth consecutive year where the number of Vietnamese workers abroad exceeded 100,000 employees [8]. According to the National Assembly Committee of Social Affairs, from 2010 to 2017, the country had 821,862 workers abroad under contracts. From 2014 to 2019, the average number of laborers going abroad was over 129,000 people per year, accounting for approximately 7% of the total new jobs of the entire country. The number of workers going to labor export increased fastest to Japan, with an increase of 461% between 2013-2017. In the same period, the number of workers going to work in Taiwan increased by 183%, and in the Middle East by 120% [9].

Phu Tho Province is a largely rural area located at the gateway to the Northern midlands and mountains region of Vietnam. Almost 80% of the province is mountainous, and the rural communities struggle with comparatively high rates of unemployment and poverty. Within the province, there are around 850,600 people of working age with roughly 80% living in rural areas. Of those people, only approximately 17% are considered as being skilled [10].

Currently, labor export is envisioned as an effective poverty reduction strategy and economic stimulator for new rural construction in the province. Furthermore, it is believed that the social and professional skills learned abroad can be utilized effectively in the home communities when the laborer returns. Overall, the Phu Tho provincial government has also determined that labor export is a meaningful strategy to reduce poverty, create jobs, and raise incomes in local communities. In 2019, the number of people in Phu Tho Province who went to work abroad is 3,316 people, distributed in the markets of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia. Households at or below the poverty line have been provided with

information on the policies relevant to and labor export programs available, as well as some of the tools necessary to overcome precursory entry barriers (e.g., bank loan procedures for down payments) [8]. From the perspective of the government, this knowledge transfer helps those households most at risk to take advantage of overseas opportunities and simultaneously benefits the economic development of some of the provinces' poor communities through skills training and the eventual remittances back to their home communities.

Nonetheless, questions arise as to which overseas market most benefits those seeking economic opportunity. Simultaneously, to provide solutions and recommendations to continue to promote the role of labor export policy in contributing to the socio-economic development of Phu Tho Province, this study was organized with three specific objectives: (i) To provide an overview of theoretical basis to clarify the framework of factors affecting the decision to export labor of rural workers (ii) To identify factors affecting the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province; (iii) To propose recommendations the provincial leaders and businesses.

## **2. Overview of labor export activities**

### **2.1. Literature review**

There are several recent publications focused on labor export activities in Vietnam and even Phu Tho Province in particular. These include Phan The Cong (2011) "Vietnam's model of export-based economic growth" [11]; Nguyen Kim Anh et al. (2017) "Remittance policy for socio-economic development of Vietnam" [12]; Nguyen Thi Lan Huong (2016) "Laborers returning to work overseas for a definite period of time"[13]; Bui Thi Hong Minh & Nguyen Ngoc Minh Tuan (2018) "Labor export contributes to labor restructuring in Phu

Tho province”[14]. The above studies have generalized the theory of labor export activities, the status of labor export, and state management of labor export. In so doing, they provide some solutions to improve and renovate the organizational system and management mechanisms of the labor export activities of Vietnam. However, there have been no studies on the factors affecting the decision-making on labor export of rural workers. To help to fill this gap, the following model and research hypotheses have been designed as shown in Figure 1.

There are six hypotheses including:

Hypothesis 1 ( $H_1$ ): The expected market has a positive impact on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province; Hypothesis 2 ( $H_2$ ): The expected income has a positive impact on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province; Hypothesis 3 ( $H_3$ ): Employment opportunities positively affect the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho province; Hypothesis 4 ( $H_4$ ): Social networks have a positive impact on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province; Hypothesis 5 ( $H_5$ ): Personal factors positively affect the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province; Hypothesis 6 ( $H_6$ ): Cost factors have a positive impact on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province.

## 2.2. Labor export activities from Vietnam and Phu Tho Province

An estimated 580,000 Vietnamese workers are working in 40 different countries globally, bringing in remittances between US\$ 2 billion annually and this number

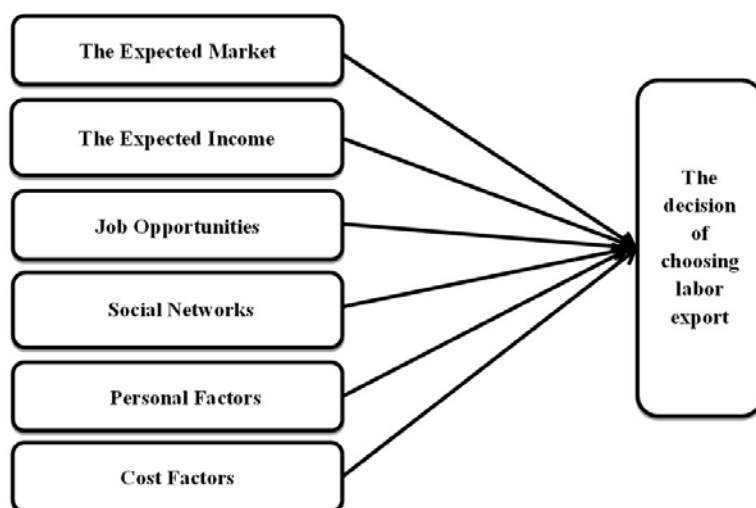


Figure 1. Model and research hypotheses

is constantly increasing over the years. In 2019, the number was the highest to date, with 147,387 (of which 49,324 were female) (Department of Management of Foreign Labor, Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, 2019). This near doubling of overseas Vietnamese workers over the last decade. The leading destination was the Japanese market (80,002 employees with 28,948 females), Taiwan (54,480 with 18,287 females), and South Korea (7,215 with 514 females) [8]. While Taiwan has remained a leading destination for Vietnamese laborers, the rise in popularity of Japan is a recent and rapid development [8]. Thus, 2019 is the sixth consecutive year that the number of workers going to work abroad exceeds 100,000 laborers per year (2014: 106,840 employees, 2015: 115,980 employees, 2016: 126,289 employees, 2017: 134,751 employees, and 2018: 142,860 employees) [8].

Vietnam is one of the top 10 countries receiving the largest number of remittances in the world, with US\$16,7 billion in 2019. 2019 is also the third consecutive year that Vietnam is in the top 10, up 5% from US\$15.9 billion in 2018; an

increase of 21% compared to US\$13.8 billion in 2017 and an increase of nearly 13 times compared to more than US\$1.3 billion in 2000; nearly 120 times higher than US\$0.14 billion in 1993. According to statistics, the US usually accounts for nearly half of remittances from Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh City. Ho Chi Minh City usually accounts for nearly 50% of the country's total annual remittances [15]. The main target groups that send overseas remittances to Vietnam are overseas Vietnamese and export workers, with overseas Vietnamese mainly residing in the US, Canada, Germany, and France, accounting for the majority of 80-90% of the remittance sent home. In the period between 2010 and 2019, remittances accounted for 6-8% of annual GDP, higher than other developed countries on average accounting for 1-2% of GDP [8].

In the growth of remittance sources in general, the amount overseas workers remitted over the years also regularly increased, from US\$1.7 billion in 2010 to US\$3.05 billion in 2018. Labor export plays an important role in the number of remittances sent to Vietnam, and remittance is one of the three important parts of the

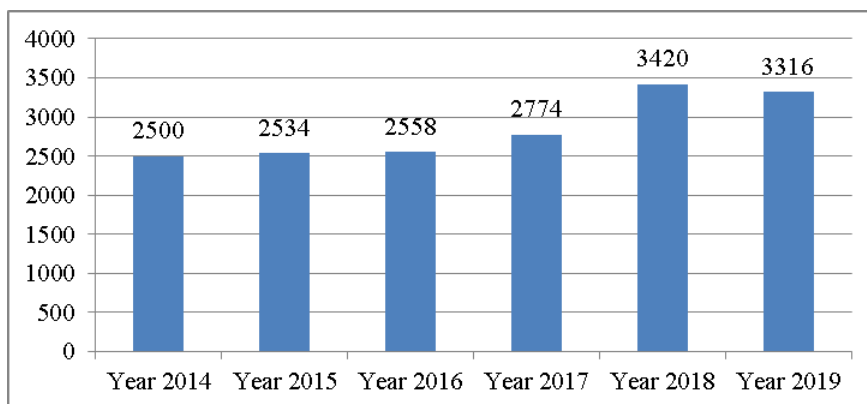
foreign economic sector, contributing to promoting GDP growth. The rapid increase in the amount of labor export remittance sent home and the number of remittances is a significant source of national revenue [8, 15].

However, while remittances (in general) in other sectors increased relatively steadily, remittances from labor export were not stable, with erratic increases or decreases. The reason is that remittances from labor export depend on the changes in the number of labor export, which is strongly influenced by the labor market and any economic crises [1].

\* Labor export activities in Phu Tho Province

Phu Tho Province contributes a disproportionate and rapidly increasing number of workers to overseas destinations. This number has recently expanded again by one-third, reaching 3,420 in 2018, and 3,316 in 2019. Remittances of workers are sent approximately US\$35 million each year. From this income, many families have been able to invest in agricultural production and small businesses, allowing many to raise out of poverty (Figure 2).

*Unit: Number of workers*



**Figure 2. Laborers from Phu Tho Province working abroad [1, 8]**

Of the 2,774 people from Phu Tho Province working abroad in 2017, Taiwan was the leading destination with just over 50%, followed by Japan (24.51%), and then Korea (4.47%), Malaysia (5.26%), and countries within Eastern Europe [8, 16]

It is said that labor export is an important task to contribute positively to problems of malnutrition and poverty alleviation and to raise incomes more generally. Therefore, the provincial People's Committee has directed the branches and localities to continue diversifying the form of labor export focusing on quality, improving efficiency, and the effectiveness of state management to develop labor export in a sustainable way that fosters both economic and social effects. The city/districts with a high number of labor export workers such as Viet Tri City, Lam Thao, Thanh Ba, and Cam Khe district have significantly changed their approaches regarding labor export activities [17].

Previously, the percentage of skilled workers who worked abroad account for around 50% of the total (mainly mechanical, welding, mechanic scaffolding, tiling, garment, nursing, medical care, and household helpers). About 5% of employees were university graduates who also participated in labor export, focusing on construction engineering, mechanical engineering, machine manufacturing, computer science, and nursing [16].

### 3. Methods

Research for this article comprised two main phases. First, 10 university students of Japanese language and culture from Hung Vuong University (HVU) in Viet Tri City of Phu Tho Province who intended to work overseas were asked questions on and their opinions of the appropriateness of our preliminary survey. This allowed for slight modifications in the research model,

hypothesis, and associated quantitative scales.

The next phase of research occurred between 2010-2019 in various locations in Phu Tho Province. Formal research was done by quantitative research methods. The study used exploratory factor analysis and a linear regression model to analyze the factors affecting the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province. To test the research hypotheses, survey questionnaires were used. There were 26 observed variables in this topic, so the minimum number of samples needed was 26 multiplied by 5 equals 130 samples.

A sample of 150 rural workers (laborers) who are being trained in Japanese to enter the labor export market at the training center of HVU was surveyed. The study used a convenient method of sampling by geographical area to collect primary data. Data was collected by distributing surveys asking participants to "tick" the appropriate answers. Overall, 142 valid surveys were collected. A five-point Likert scale was applied to measure the variables affecting the decision of choosing labor export (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

Data were analyzed with SPSS<sub>16</sub> software. The data set was initially used to perform general statistics to describe the use of quantities including averages, variance, and standard deviation. These were combined with tools such as frequency tables and graphs used to describe characteristics of the interviewees including gender, education level, and work experience. The scale value was evaluated by EFA analysis: EFA concurrent analysis for all measurement criteria with angle rotation Varimax with eigenvalue criteria > 1.0 and KMO index > 0.5 to determine the factors representing variables; evaluate the reliability of the scales



and evaluate through Cronbach's Alpha for each of the observed variable groups of different factors to remove unimportant variables. The reliability of Cronbach's Alpha must be between 0.6 and 1.0, and the correlation coefficient of the right variable > 0.3 to ensure the variables in the same group of factors are correlated in meaning.

The model reflects the factors affecting the decision to export labor of rural workers (Y- dependent variable) in Phu Tho Province with the linear regression equation as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Market} + \beta_2 \text{Income} + \beta_3 \text{Job} + \beta_4 \text{NETWORK} + \beta_5 \text{PERSON} + \beta_6 \text{COST} + u_i$$

Based on the literature and previous qualitative research, these variables are used for analyzing the factors influencing choosing labor export in general. The definitions of main variables are the expected market, the expected income, job opportunities, social networks, personal factors, cost factors, and decisions.

To quantify the influence, these variables were divided into sub-components. This includes MARKET<sub>1</sub> (The country has a dynamic, democratic, and scientific working environment); MARKET<sub>2</sub> (The country has good infrastructure (e.g., roads, schools, and hospitals)); MARKET<sub>3</sub> (The country provides clear information and procedures for overseas workers); MARKET<sub>4</sub> (The country has many opportunities to reach higher educational levels); MARKET<sub>5</sub> (The country has good shopping and entertainment opportunities); MARKET<sub>6</sub> (The country has many opportunities to access modern science and advanced technology (with association and investment with foreign enterprises)).

Other sub-variables: INCOME 1 (Your income received is worthy of your working

capacity); INCOME 2 (Your income in that country is enough to live and save); INCOME<sub>3</sub> (Your income in that country is much higher than in Vietnam). JOB<sub>1</sub> (The country you are pursuing has favorable conditions to improve your skills); JOB<sub>2</sub> (The country you are pursuing provides opportunities for earning promotions in future work); JOB<sub>3</sub> (The country you are pursuing provides the opportunities to work overtime); JOB<sub>4</sub> (Your country you are seeking to participate labor export program is in high demand for unskilled labor from other countries); NETWORK<sub>1</sub> (Your family, relatives, and/or friends have been working in that country); NETWORK<sub>2</sub> (Your family, relatives, and/or friends have a wide and familiar relationship with the citizens of that country); NETWORK<sub>3</sub> (Your family, relatives and/or friends can provide financial support (give or lend to help you get to that country)); NETWORK<sub>4</sub> (Your family, relatives, and/or friends already have available business establishments in that country);

PERSON<sub>1</sub> (You are fond of the people and culture of that country); PERSON<sub>2</sub> (You have been fond of that country since your youth); PERSON<sub>3</sub> (You see that country is being chosen by many Vietnamese people for export); COST<sub>1</sub> (The cost of exporting labor is consistent with the level of the workers' payment); COST<sub>2</sub> (The cost of exporting labor in the destination country is lower compared to other countries); COST<sub>3</sub> (You see that labor export in that country has an appropriate cost of living); DECIDE<sub>1</sub> (Workers will earn high savings after returning to their homeland); DECIDE<sub>2</sub> (Workers will have professional skills and opportunities to work with wages at foreign companies after returning home); DECIDE<sub>3</sub> (Workers will be able to use foreign languages fluently).

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Characteristics of survey samples

The data used in the study were collected from the results of 142 questionnaires. Respondents included 84 female students (59.15%) and 58 male students (40.85%). Of these, 96 workers completed high school (67.61%), 31 workers completed primary and secondary school (21.83%) and 15 had graduated from university (10.56%).

In terms of the economic backgrounds of respondents, 15 (10.56%) were from households in poverty, 39 from near poverty (26.46%), 67 from medium income (47.18%), 16 from above-average income (11.27%), and 5 from wealthy households (3.52%).

Analysis of the descriptive statistics revealed that the average score in the decision to export labor due to expected income (INCOME), decided to take the labor export (DECIDE) and employment opportunities (JOB) was highest at 4.28/5, 4.16/5, and 4.12/5 points respectively. The average score of other variables such as personal factors (PERSON), the market expected (MARKET), and social network (NETWORK) were 3.60/5; 3.51/5, and 3.20/5 points. The rating of cost factor was the lowest of the factors with 2.42/5 points. Therefore, it can be argued that workers from rural Phu Tho Province increasingly select Japan as a target destination as they have better-earning possibilities, as well as the belief that will have ample opportunities to work overtime (Source: Authors' illustration)

### 4.2. Evaluation of the reliability of the data

The results of the reliability test using the Cronbach'Alpha coefficient show that all 6 independent variables and the dependent variable (DECIDE) are greater than 0.6. However, the correlation coefficients of the corrected total variable (Corrected item-

total Correlation) of variables MARKET<sub>3</sub>, MARKET<sub>6</sub>, NETWORK<sub>2</sub>, NETWORK<sub>4</sub>, and PERSON<sub>2</sub> <0.30 are unsatisfactory and these variables are therefore excluded.

After eliminating variables MARKET<sub>3</sub>, MARKET<sub>6</sub>, NETWORK<sub>2</sub>, NETWORK<sub>4</sub>, and PERSON<sub>2</sub>, a second test of the two scales was conducted at which time the Cronbach Alpha coefficients are greater than 0.6 and the correlation coefficients of the observed variables equally > 0.30. Thus, this scale after eliminating the above variables has increased the reliability required and is satisfactory.

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to determine the factors affecting the decision to migrate as labor for rural workers in Phu Tho Province. The results of exploratory factor analysis of the 6 independent variable scales show that the coefficient KMO = 0.657 and the scale of the dependent variable (DECIDE) with KMO coefficient = 0.669 is in the range of 0.5 <KMO <1, factor analysis. As such, the factor is appropriate. Testing Bartlett's with Sig. = 0,000 represents a high level of significance.

### 4.3. The relationship between the factors affecting the dependent variable

According to the analyzed data, the multiple regression results have a value of 0.68 (satisfying  $0 \leq R_2 \leq 1$ ), indicating that the relationship between the variables in the model is quite strict ( $R_2 > 0.5$ ). This means that 68% of the volatility of the decision to export labor is explained by the six factors included in the model. The adjusted value of 0.64 indicates the variability of the factors affecting the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province (DECIDE) is explained by 64% by the impact of the independent variables in the model. According to the analysis results of  $F = 23.66$ , the level Sig. = 0,000 <0.05. From this, it is

concluded that independent variables are linearly related to the dependent variable with a 95% confidence level.

According to the regression results, the content of regression analysis with reliability is 95%, corresponding to independent variables with Sig. <0.05 and positive beta normalization coefficient has 6 variables with Sig. > 0.05. Thus, six independent variables are significantly correlated with the dependent variable. However, there are COST variables that negatively affect the regression equation. The regression equation, therefore, has the following form:

$$\text{DECIDE (Y)} = 0,986 + 0,161*\text{MARKET} + 0,501*\text{INCOME} + 0,424*\text{JOB} + 0,236*\text{NETWORK} + 0,088*\text{PERSON} - 0,250*\text{COST} + e_i$$

From the results, it is shown that the decision of going to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province (DECIDE) is positively influenced by 5 factors, including the market expected; the expected income; job opportunities; social network; and personal factors. On the contrary, the cost factor influences the decision to export labor. More specifically, the expected income and employment opportunities are two factors that have the strongest impact (0.501 and 0.424 respectively) on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province. Most workers who desire to go abroad come from low-income families, so they want to go to markets like Japan. Many labor export markets need to recruit new occupational groups that Vietnamese workers can meet, such as nursing, agriculture, and the technology sectors. This creates many opportunities to find employment with high income for workers when choosing to work abroad. These are positive signals in maintaining traditional markets and expanding new labor export markets.

Individual decision-making is a factor with a low significant impact (0.088). Instead, those seeking employment overseas rely more on social networks, which is also one of the factors affecting workers' decision to go abroad (0.236). Most workers are younger, so they often rely on the guidance of family or friends to make decisions about participating in labor export programs. In many cases, parents are often the decision-maker on behalf of younger workers.

While the market is one of the factors affecting decision-making, its impact was less significant (0.161). Normally, workers are directed to high- and stable-income markets such as Japan, Korea, or Australia. However, these markets require foreign language skills and often have stringent age and health requirements. For those workers who do not meet the above conditions, Taiwan offers comparatively lower-income opportunities, but considerably easier access to employment.

Cost factors have a negative impact on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province (-0.25). Cost is one of the issues that many people are interested in when learning about labor export programs in general and to Japan more specifically. The lower the potential cost, the more workers will be attracted to the labor export program. In contrast, export costs are higher for rural workers of low incomes will choose markets that have lower export costs.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusions

This study has shown that the decision to export labor of rural workers from Phu Tho Province is influenced by 6 factors including the market expected, expected income, job opportunities, social network, personal factors, and cost factors. In terms of the expected income, job opportunities are the two strongest



factors affecting decision-making. Participants in labor export programs are mainly from low or middle-income families. Most of their income is remitted to their families in Vietnam to save or pay debts from exit costs. On average, Vietnamese workers in Japan will earn a monthly income of about US\$1,200-1,500 per month (considerably higher than in Vietnam) which is a sizeable amount of money for rural workers, helping them to build houses, raise children, and improve the quality of their lives in Vietnam. These variables include market expected, social networks, and personal reasons are 3 factors that have a low impact on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province.

Cost factors have a negative impact on the decision to export labor of rural workers in Phu Tho Province. Cost is one of the issues of concern when potential overseas laborers learn about the labor export program in general and to Japan more specifically. The lower the potential cost, the more workers will be attracted to the labor export program. In contrast, export costs are higher for rural workers of low incomes will choose markets with lower export costs. Therefore, labor export enterprises in Phu Tho should have competitive measures to reduce non-export costs to attract workers.

## 5.2. Recommendations

The local government should continue to study and consider signing agreements on labor cooperation with traditional markets to bring more workers from Phu Tho to work abroad; promote new markets, a great deal of potential exists to expand agreements on these markets.

Strengthening the inspection, examination, recertification, and strict handling of service enterprises that violate the provisions of law and enterprises operating ineffectively. Additional focus on the organization of the operational apparatus of the enterprises,

the selection and fostering of necessary knowledge, and the collection of fees is required [16].

Vietnamese labor exporting enterprises need to negotiate contracts with Japanese enterprises with high contractual wages and considerable opportunities for overtime. The labor export enterprises need to build their own reputable brand in labor export activities to impact groups of family, friends, and the workers themselves. In addition, the creation and enhancement of the image of enterprises will help both businesses and workers to benefit from labor export activities and contribute to the socio-economic development of the province [16, 17].

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## **LỰA CHỌN ĐIỂM ĐẾN ĐỐI VỚI LÀM VIỆC TẠI NƯỚC NGOÀI: TRƯỜNG HỢP XUẤT KHẨU LAO ĐỘNG TẠI TỈNH PHÚ THỌ, VIỆT NAM**

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### **Tóm tắt**

Xuất khẩu lao động hiện nay được xem như một trong những hoạt động kinh tế đối ngoại quan trọng và mang lại lợi ích to lớn cho sự phát triển kinh tế - xã hội ở Việt Nam. Với lượng kiều hối từ xuất khẩu lao động lên đến hàng tỷ USD một năm, hoạt động này đã giúp hàng nghìn hộ gia đình ổn định sinh kế và góp phần đổi mới cộng đồng nông thôn. Nghiên cứu này đã tìm ra các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến quyết định đi xuất khẩu lao động của người lao động tại tỉnh Phú Thọ. Các yếu tố liên quan đến văn hóa và xã hội bao gồm cá nhân, thị trường mong đợi, định hướng từ gia đình, bạn bè và chi phí, các yếu tố này đều được so sánh và phân tích để đánh giá quyết định đi xuất khẩu lao động của người lao động. Các kết quả dựa trên phương pháp thống kê mô tả và phân tích hồi quy. Nhật Bản được coi là một điểm đến mục tiêu tối ưu. Khi nền kinh tế Nhật Bản tiếp tục mở cửa và có nhu cầu nhiều hơn đối với lao động nước ngoài, nghiên cứu đưa ra một số đề xuất về cách chuẩn bị tốt hơn cho người lao động Việt Nam để tận dụng cơ hội này.

**Từ khóa:** *Xuất khẩu lao động, lao động nông thôn, kiều hối, tỉnh Phú Thọ.*