THE EFFECTS OF FEMALE URBAN MIGRATION ON RURAL
THAI HOUSEHOLD AND VILLAGE STRUCTURES

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By

Genevieve F. Greer

Thesis Committee:
Barbara Watson Andaya, Chairperson
Miriam Sharma
L. Ayu Saraswati

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Provincial Map of Thailand
Map of Isan
Map Courtesy of Tourism Authority of Thailand
Introduction

Throughout the world the increasing accessibility of transportation and communication technologies has facilitated a rise in worker migration patterns and transnationalism. While migration is by no means a new topic, it is my belief that any research performed on migration or transnationalism needs to account for gender relations, because, to quote Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, “gender relations shape immigration patterns, and in turn, migration experiences reshape gender relations” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:3). Gender influences migration patterns, because many workers engage in occupations that are gender specific. Male migrants frequently work in agriculture, construction, or other fields that require heavier manual labor; meanwhile, female migrants often work in industries like domestic employment. Additionally, a migrant’s familial gender roles both influence migration patterns and also change as result of these patterns. In their research on international migrant workers from Mexico and the Philippines, ethnographers Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas analyzed the emergence of transnational families. In these families, parents work abroad and their absence promotes changes in both child-rearing and other household practices, as well as transformations to the migrants’ origin communities (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Parreñas 2002). Such changes can lead to social stresses and frictions. For example, in her research on the children of Filipino international migrant workers, Parreñas explored the feelings of abandonment and longing that these children encountered as a result of their parents working abroad (Parreñas 2002). While these ethnographers focus on transnational families, such social changes are by no means limited to international worker migration, but are also applicable to rural-urban migration and other domestic population flows. This thesis will cover a less explored topic of how a nation’s internal
worker migrations can promote comparable changes to gender relations of migrants, their families and their communities. In so doing, it opens up this new path of investigation because even though domestic migrants do not go abroad and are able to visit their origin communities more frequently; they are still removed from their families and villages, and therefore have the potential to similarly alter the dynamics of rural households and communities.

Migration, whether between countries or within a nation, is not simply a shift of populations from one place to another. Rather, the social and gender role changes promoted by migration can be seen along the multiple sites of the migration process. This thesis will focus on rural-urban migration in Southeast Asia - in particular Thailand - and will investigate how such migration affects the gender relations in migrants’ communities and households. The region of Thailand which forms the focus of this thesis lies in the northeast, bordering Laos, and even by the standards of rural Thailand has limited prosperity. The relative poverty of the region propels its residents into urban migration in order to earn a living, and in the Thai context provides the clearest example of regional effects arising from urban migration.

While the effects of Southeast Asia’s 20th and 21st centuries’ workers migration flows to urban centers is a topic that has attracted considerable scholarly attention, what is frequently omitted in these investigations is how the absence of migrants from their origin communities has resulted in changes to household and community practices relating, among other things, to child-rearing, marital unions, and filial piety. Such an investigation is warranted because, as academics such as Sylvia Chant and Sarah A. Radcliffe have pointed out, the social changes resulting from migration flows (particularly gender-differentiated migrant flows) are not restricted to the urban centers receiving the new populations. Rather, such migrations promote
societal and cultural transformations within the multiple sites of the migration process, including the origin communities.

This thesis investigates Thailand’s urban migration from the country’s rural northeastern provinces, known as the Isan region. By looking at a specific case study of the town of Renu Nakon, and its adjacent village of Nong Yang Sin, in the Isan province of Nakon Phanom, we will show that Sylvia Chant and Sarah Radcliffe are correct in their argument that:

whether members or households and/or communities in source areas and receiving areas of migrant populations are predominantly male or female, old or young, kin or strangers; what activities they undertake in the context of available opportunities in their immediate localities; and the extent to which they rely on earnings of workers in distant parts of the country or overseas, are critically important in understanding such issues as the changing nature of family organization, labour market structures, patterns of inter- and intra-regional inequalities and so on. In short, gender-differentiated population movement may be significant in a whole range of ways to societies undergoing development change. (Chant and Radcliffe1992:1)

To expand upon this idea, we must also realize that the development processes of countries like Thailand are also related to greater issues of modernization and globalization. In Thailand, migrant workers fall into the category of what Arjun Appadurai defines as “ethnoscapes”, or “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live.” According to Appadurai, “ethnoscapes” are a means by which cultural material is exchanged and “disjunctive global flows” emerge (1996:33-47). He theorized that the world’s increasing rate of globalization and its preoccupation with modernization would only further promote the occurrence of disjunctures within “ethnoscapes” such as migrant populations and, from such disjunctures, cultural production occurs. To contextualize this idea within the example of Thai migrant workers: rural migrant workers are frequently perceived as symbols of modernity and, as a result of their influence, rural communities often feel pressured to modernize as well. To bring this into the framework of our discussion, for rural Thais this means pressure to adapt to
metropolitan technologies, style of dress and behavior. In particular, metropolitan fashions are a symbol of modernity for many Thais, because in Thailand being modern is frequently synonymous with being cosmopolitan.\(^1\) However, as this thesis will show, this adjustment is not necessarily a smooth process and, through its disjunctures and iterations, rural communities are forced to redefine how their societies and cultures function.

As we think about how “ethnoscapcs” promote cultural exchange, it should be noted that emotions can also traverse these population flows as well. In building off of Appadurai’s theories, L. Ayu Saraswati called this theoretical space an “emotionscape” or a “mode of interpreting how emotions are visualized, interpreted, and made legible in spaces of representation” (Saraswati 2013:69). When thinking about rural-urban migration, it is necessary to account for the ways in which emotions can also promote social changes amongst migrants and their families. As later chapters will investigate, the emotions brought on by the migration process and people’s narratives of these emotions can be used as tools by people to situate themselves within the migration process.

The case study of Renu Nakon / Nong Yang Sin (referred to as Renu and Nong Yang) shows us that Thailand’s urbanization in metropolitan centers such as Bangkok has coincided with the transition of rural economies from primarily kinship-based (a term we explore in some detail below) to increasingly commercially and / or remittance based relationships. This is a topic that Ara Wilson has also explored. However, while Wilson’s research is concentrated

\(^1\) The emphasis Thai people place on the aesthetic is partly stems from the Buddhist rationale that a person’s physical beauty reflects his or her spirituality and morality (Van Esterik 2000: 84). Additionally, beauty has traditionally been seen as the primary method to overcome power and social hierarchies. For example, in the past the country’s sumptuary rules, which preserved hierarchies by regulating behavior and consumption of material goods, could be broken by either beautiful people, or in ceremonies such as weddings and ordinations, where people were allowed to dress in the ‘royal style’ of the Thai elite (Van Esterik 2000: 129)
primarily on how this economic transition affects Bangkok communities and families, this thesis opens up a new avenue of research by focusing on the rural perspective.

Thailand’s industrialization process has brought about more than just economic change. It has also instigated a number of concurrent cultural transformations that have resulted in pressures on some of the core values around which Thai communities, and in particular rural communities, have pivoted. In rural communities, household incomes used to be based primarily on agricultural income but, as the country has developed, the younger population has abandoned the occupations of its predecessors in search of more substantial income in urban centers. At present, many rural households are dependent upon the remittances of the new generation of urban migrants and children are now being raised with the expectation that they will probably migrate to a city at some point in their life. This migration process is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of rural life in Thailand and, as such, we see a change in how the rural communities and their households structure and organize themselves.

One of the clearest markers of change within these rural communities concerns women. Women are disproportionately recruited as workers by urban-based companies because they are considered more suited to factory work, due to the popular belief that women are more docile than men (and therefore easier to manage in the factory setting), as well as other factors we will explore. This alters many of the gender roles in Isan communities, as women become the primary bread-winners and also experience greater mobility and social freedom. As a result of female migrants’ mobility, academics such as Ara Wilson have written that migrants not only serve as sources of revenue but they are also the “brokers of modernity for their village” (Wilson 2004:93). Accordingly, the changes in gender roles of female migrants have also given rise to
transformations within the structure of Isan villages and their households, including child rearing practices, labor networks, and kinship alliance systems.

In focusing on the northeastern Isan provinces, this thesis makes an important point. Isan is the region of Thailand that has traditionally been the most neglected and disenfranchised and which, as a result, supplies a large percentage of Thai urban migrant workers. The Isan region is a culturally distinct part of Thailand; it has its own dialect, cuisine, and subcultures. While still primarily Buddhist (with the majority of people practicing Theravada Buddhism), Isan communities retain their own animist traditions and also preserve distinctive clothing and dance traditions. Migrants from the region primarily find job positions of easy entry, participating in a variety of fields, such as agriculture and seasonal rubber harvesting in Southern Thailand, and manufacturing and construction in urban centers. Men from Isan typically are involved in construction and agriculture, seasonal work that allows them to return to their hometowns more frequently for labor intensive periods, such as the October rice harvest. Women, meanwhile, typically find work in the factories in and around urban centers or factory-complexes used for outsourcing in less urban locations. These migrants usually work at a factory for a period of a few years, and return to visit their hometowns during the holidays or to raise their children. While some cities in Isan, such as Ubon Ratchatani, now have a growing local textile industry, for many women the easiest way to find factory employment is to venture south to Bangkok, utilizing existing networks of friends and family members who already reside there to help them find a position.

2 Some migrant workers who decide to return to their origin communities in order to raise their children, permanently settle in their villages. Meanwhile, other migrants will return to their villages for the years that their children require greater care and later return to the urban areas when their children are old enough to be left without supervision or in the care of relatives.
The prevalence of Isan migrant workers throughout Thailand is well known. At the same time, Thais pay little attention to changes within Isan villages and are also relatively indifferent to the fact that people originating from Isan frequently encounter discrimination from other Thai populations and are stigmatized for their darker complexions and flatter facial features. These facial features are often recognized as belonging to the Lao ethnic group. The Isan region has historically been occupied by three different ethnic groups; the Lao, the Khmer, and the Siamese. Lao people occupy the majority of the population of the Khorat Plateau of Isan, and previously were denied their independence by the Siamese population and government. In the past this suppression has led to several rebellions in the region such as, the 1902 “Phi Bun” rebellion in Ubon Ratchathani (Fukui 1993: 34). The discrimination and neglect that the Isan population has historically endured has led to widespread resentment towards the centralist (Siamese) dominated government and the urban elite populace. Increased migration flows exacerbate existing resentment: tension in the laboring populations from the Isan provinces leads to political resentment towards Bangkok’s elites, as exhibited by the recent “red-shirt/yellow-shirt” political divide between the urban elites (yellow being the royal color) and those who historically have been less well served by the national government. Academics such as David Brown have characterized the relationship between the northeastern Thai provinces and the Thai state as one of internal colonization, whereby the people of the northeast were systematically neglected and now have to contend with a brain drain pattern, in which the smartest and most successful individuals from these provinces often move - even in the face of widespread discrimination - to the urban centers in search of increased educational and financial opportunities in urban areas (Brown 1994:110).
With this as a backdrop, we will focus specifically on how urban migration from the Isan region has altered rural village and household social structures. These changes are taking place against a background of rising tensions between the rural populations of Isan (as well as the urban population originating from Isan) and the urban Thai elites. This has contributed to a number of violent protests by the red-shirts formally known as the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). The red-shirts are comprised primarily of people from rural areas and, in particular, the Isan provinces. Informants from Renu / Nong Yang approximated that 90% of the local population aligns itself with the red-shirt party, and this majority was thought to be reflective of the political leanings of the province as a whole. Like the province of Nakon Phanom, the rest of the Isan region is overwhelmingly supportive of the red-shirt party, and this political tension has increased since the time that former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra tapped into the voting power of the rural populations of Isan.³ Before he was accused of corruption and ousted, Thaksin’s policies were highly beneficial to the Isan people, and a large majority of the violent protesters who participated in the 2009 and 2010 protests and bombings of Bangkok’s economically-important locations, such as the Siam Center, came from Isan (BBC 2012). It is not uncommon to meet people in Isan who have a family member or family members who were arrested during those protests. The social tensions that were ignited then have since moderated – perhaps only temporarily - in the past two years with the election of Thaksin’s sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, to the position of prime minister. However, a cultural divide between the Isan people and the Thai urban elites continues and still promotes social tensions resonating throughout the country and which keep open the possibility of future turmoil.

³ Thaksin’s economic policies, or what is now commonly referred to as “Thaksinomics”, were a set of populist policies specifically aimed at Thailand’s rural people. Policies such as the One Tambon One Product (OTOP), and the four debt moratoriums for farmers, enabled farmers and small businesses owners to financially recover after the 1997 Asian financial crash (Looney 2008).
While many Isan people harbor resentment towards the urban elites of Bangkok, in Isan – as is generally the case throughout Thailand – the city of Bangkok itself is still considered to be center of Thai culture. Bangkok only became the capital of Thailand (or Siam, as it was previously called) in 1782, when Rama I moved the royal court to this location and began establishing the city in the image of the former capital, Ayutthaya, today about an hour’s drive north from Bangkok. During the 19th century, Bangkok led the country’s development process as a series of rulers, Rama II through VI, successively introduced public work projects ranging from the construction of numerous temples throughout the city (which also served as schools, hospitals, and libraries) to the installment of an electric tram service in 1892. In the present day, the majority of Thailand’s media outlets are based in Bangkok. Each one of the country’s daily newspapers (and the majority of its weekly and monthly publications as well) are printed in Bangkok. Likewise, all of the country’s television channels and the majority of the country’s radio stations broadcast from the city (Sternstein 2013). As a result, Bangkok’s cultural influence can be seen throughout the country. In Renu and Nong Yang, many villagers grow up esteeming Bangkok because of its role in Thailand’s historical development and how it is featured in the media. Villagers will spend hours each day watching Thai TV dramas produced in the city, and will marvel at how modern and beautiful everything and everyone on these shows appears. This esteem encourages many villagers to travel to the city, and adopt aspects of the metropolitan lifestyle, even though they might simultaneously resent the discrimination and hardships they suffer, and which are reflected in the Thai government and media’s centralist focus.

In the past, Bangkok served not only as the primary destination for the majority of migrant workers, but was also the focus of many of the state’s development and urbanization
plans. As a result, many Thais believe that the city of Bangkok epitomizes the country’s development. While Bangkok has been the site of many public works and infrastructure projects for over two centuries, many other Thai provinces have received considerably less attention. For instance, in Isan many of the state’s development policies have focused on sustainable agriculture projects rather than on the infrastructure and development of the Isan towns and cities. The disparity between the Bangkok Metropolitan Region’s development, infrastructure build-out and industrialization, and that of the rest of the country, has been a massive lure for and contributing factor to the city’s massive rural-urban population flows (Pansuwan 2010:119). In 2000, 54.9 percent of Thailand’s urban population resided in Bangkok’s metropolitan region (UN 2000:101). The Thai government is aware that greater attention needs to be paid to the balance of urbanization and rural-development in order effectively to decentralize the country’s economic development, promote rural development and begin to decrease the rate of Bangkok’s rural-urban migration (DCO 2000:2; DCO 2001:5; Sheng:15). In an effort to decentralize the country’s economic development, the Thai government has started to promote manufacturing in smaller-scale cities such as Udon Thai (Pansuwan 2010). However, for migrant workers, such changes are not always beneficial. While migrants might be closer to their families and communities working in provincial cities, migrants often receive lower wages and have less access to workers’ unions (and other such resources) than they would have if working in Bangkok.

My interest and field experience in the Isan region stems from the time I spent in the Nakon Phanom province as a teacher and my subsequent return visits. Located along the Mae Kong river and adjacent to Laos, Nakon Phanom province is in the northeast part of Isan and is twelve hours by bus from Bangkok. The following paragraphs will offer a brief description of
the industries, religions, languages, and societal issues found in Nakon Phanom, its town Renu and its village Nong Yang. These seemingly disparate topics all combine to provide useful background knowledge for following investigation on the effects of urban migration of the region.

The primary industry in Nakon Phanom is agriculture and, while rice is the foremost harvested crop, farmers in the province often have smaller fields of vegetables such as corn and leafy greens. This province has historically received scant national recognition and little interest from tourists – save for the Thatphanom temple in the far south of the province. However, the opening of a bridge to Laos in the past two years has brought an increase in the number of backpacker tourists who travel through the province on their way to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (but it cannot be determined at this time what effect this increase in tourism has had on local economies). Like the rest of Thailand, the primary religion in the province is Theravada Buddhism but, there are also small pockets of Catholics and Mahayana Buddhists. Thai is the spoken language used in more formal settings, such as schools and businesses, but in the marketplace or households Lao and Isan are frequently used. In the town of Renu Nakon and its adjacent village Nong Yang Sin – where I spent the majority of my residency – a local dialect, Phu Thai, is often used. In Renu and Nong Yang, the language can also serve as a marker of a person’s origin and education. For instance, when – after an absence of 15 months – I returned to Renu on my first day of field research, and I went out to dinner with two former coworkers. When they picked me up, one of the first things they took note of was my more formal speaking manner. Since I had last seen them, I had been learning Thai with a professor from Bangkok

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4 Wat Thatphanom, or Temple Thatphanom, is a well-known Thai tourist site in the center of the city of Thatphanom. This temple is renowned because it is believed that it holds a bone of the Buddha. As result, Thatphanom is the most widely recognized city in the province of Nakon Phanom.
(where people speak formally on a more regular basis), and so my speaking habits had adjusted accordingly. Within minutes of seeing my coworkers again, they were cackling and joking about my new formal pronunciation, saying that it had been so long since they had heard the formal female first-person pronoun of dichan (when people in Renu and Nong Yang speak Thai, they commonly used more colloquial Thai pronoun of chaan) that they thought I was saying an odd word in English. I quickly readjusted my speaking style after this interaction, because from my prior time in Renu / Nong Yang I knew that sometimes elder villagers will frown upon migrants return speaking Bangkok Thai as they think this signifies that migrants have lost touch with their roots.

The town of Renu Nakon is known throughout Thailand as being one of the primary locales of Phu Thai culture within the county. It has a population of approximately 8,000 people.5 Located in the south of Nakon Phanom, most people get to Renu from Bangkok by taking the bus that runs on a nightly basis. The town itself is known for its textile industry, which specializes in traditional Isan and Phu Thai garments. While Renu is distinguished for its textiles, many people who live in the town also work in other industries such as food service, agriculture, education, and healthcare (at the local hospital). The town itself is a local center for many of the adjacent villages, due to the fact that it contains a local bus stop, a large marketplace, a hospital, and an upper level high school which serves the advanced students from the surrounding villages.

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5 For the purposes of this thesis, the labels of town and village for the Renu and Nong Yang, are not derived from the population sizes, but instead stem from the Thai classification words that are used when people are formerly talking about these two sites. In Thai, Renu is formerly referred to as Muang Renu Nakon, or Town Renu Nakon, while Nong Yang is called Ban Nong Yang Sin, or Village Nong Yang Sin.
Above: image of market in Renu Nakon

Below: image of Renu Nakon hospital
One such village is Nong Yang, which is located ten minutes southeast of Renu towards route 212, alongside route 2031 – two locally significant roads. Nong Yang contains a population of approximately 3,000 people. The foremost industry for this village is agriculture. Farmers will work in the surrounding fields and then sell their goods to the Renu marketplace. A secondary field that employs many Nong Yang residents is education; teachers and school administrators for many surrounding regional schools reside in Nong Yang. As a result, the population of Nong Yang is somewhat stratified between those who work primarily in education and those who work primarily in agriculture.

Above on the left - house of a Nong Yang farmer / Above on the right - house of a Nong Yang teacher

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6 The large number of educators in Nong Yang can be attributed to two things; Nong Yang’s proximity both to the Nong Yang Sin school and to the Renu Nakon school system, and to the traditional matrilocal settlement patterns (which will be discussed at greater length in later chapters). Educators originally settled in Nong Yang due to its aforementioned proximity to local schools and over the past fifty years the number of educators has only increased because many children will follow their parents into education. These children of educators followed their parents into the field because working in education is considered to be an upper-middle class occupation in Isan and is one of the top employment options in the region. These villagers frequently will permanently settle in residences that are near to their parents’ households. As a result, in Nong Yang one sees multiple familial generations of educators all living within close proximity to one another.
Phu Thai is both the name of the local dialect and the subculture of the town Renu and the nearby village of Nong Yang. Phu Thai culture has unique styles of dress – with the traditional colors of blue and red – dance, and traditions. The Phu Thai people are believed to have originally come from Muang Thaeng in northern Laos (Mollerup 2012). Local people take great pride in their Phu Thai heritage, for while Isan people generally face discrimination in Thailand, the Phu Thai people are seen as a specialized subset of people within the Isan region and this distinction promotes a sense of local cultural identity. At present, there is an effort being made to preserve and learn more about the Phu Thai dialect and culture. As one of the larger Phu Thai settlements in Thailand, Renu has become a site for events such as Phu Thai World Day 2012 – an event in which Phu Thai academics and populations gathered to celebrate Phu Thai culture and to share their collective knowledge of Phu Thai history / culture. By way of example of this cultural pride: in Thailand, each day of the week has a corresponding color and people match their wardrobes accordingly, but in Renu and Nong Yang, Friday is the day when local schools and businesses have their students and employees wear traditional Phu Thai colors and shirts. However, while local cultural pride remains evident, it became apparent to me during my time spent in this area that the people of Renu / Nong Yang are in a state of transition, as more and more citizens are becoming migrant workers and the towns are adjusting accordingly. This has caused some concerns over local identity issues. While villagers acknowledge the economic necessity of migrant workers, many worry that their traditions will be lost as they become enveloped into Isan’s (and Thailand’s) development processes. While it might seem as though the increase in migrant labor is a simple economic change brought by

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7 At present, a collection of Thai academics - particularly linguists like Phitchaya Uttho, Thanyalak Chaiyasuk and Asger Mollerup – are working to both trace back the origins of the Phu Thai culture, and to preserve / record the local dialect. In their work, they often collaborate with local Phu Thai groups in an effort to make sure that Phu Thai culture is not lost in the region’s development process.
necessity, as subsistence farming is no longer a tenable lifestyle for many Renu and Nong Yang residents, this transition in fact has much larger cultural implications than just economics, at both an individual or household level. Migrant work is another step away from the kinship-based economic and social systems that have in the past ruled village life, and is a larger step towards emerging local market economies. Furthermore, these developing market economic factors have coincided with emerging generational and gender role differences as the communities of these towns are affected by trends encountered with modernization. Given the importance that kinship has traditionally played in the structuring and socialization of village life, in light of changes to household gender and power roles with the increasing social importance of economic gain, these cultural pressures signal more than just a shift in gender relations and are indicative of greater societal shifts.

In sum, the purpose of this thesis is to look at the rise in urban migration and how it has altered the social structures of the Isan village and household – and particularly the ways in which the increase in female migration has caused changes in village society, childcare practices, and kinship alliances. This leads me to the question that has driven my research: how has the rising independence of women in non-urban settings, attributable in no small part to the rise in female urban migration, altered rural communities in Thailand, and particularly those in the Isan region? I chose to use Renu, and its adjacent village of Nong Yang, as field sites for a case study of how Thailand’s industrialization process has affected rural Isan areas. As previously noted, Nakon Phanom is a primarily agricultural province, and due to the tenuous nature of locally practiced agriculture in the past twenty years, more and more young people from these areas see urban employment as a more stable long-term option. In the past, people from these towns, and women in particular, would go to the city for education or short-term employment and then
return to the countryside within a period of a few years. Presently, however, the younger people are prolonging their time in the urban setting to a period of a decade or more, or not returning to the countryside at all. When they do return, their reintegration into village society promotes cultural change as well.

This is not to say that, when men and women venture to the city, they sever all contact with their families. Often, provincial residents will venture to the city to seek out well-paying jobs in order to send remittances back to their families. With the rise of cellphones in the area, connectivity between the rural and urban dwellers is greater today than it used to be. In addition, many people will return to Renu and Nong Yang at certain points of the year, such as the Buddhist New Year festival Songkran in April, the Julian Calendar New Year holiday, and during the month of October to aid in the primary rice harvesting. The connectivity and circular migration flows naturally bring with them cultural flows and resulting cultural changes. The most obvious cultural changes can be seen in the shifting nature of childcare and mate selection, which are indicative of an emerging generational difference as members of the younger population are now being brought up with the expectation that, at some point, they will live in an urban setting.

My time spent in Renu and Nong Yang, prior to my fieldwork, also facilitated my interview and fieldwork process. During my initial period in Nong Yang Sin, I was the first foreigner to have lived in the village and, when I returned, I was already a familiar face and had many close relationships on which to base my research. While I was a teacher in Nong Yang, I lived in both Nong Yang and Renu. In Nong Yang, I resided in the home of fellow teacher, a widow whose sons had moved away. While there, I became closely integrated within the community – students would come over after school for extra language instruction, I would look
after my neighbors’ children while they worked in the rice fields, and I assisted with the local rice harvesting. In Renu, I lived in the old house of two Nong Yang teachers, who had just finished building their retirement house on the same property. When I returned for my fieldwork, I split my time between Renu and Nong Yang, interviewing my former neighbors, and attending local community events.

In addition, my appearance as a tall, white female meant I was easily identifiable locally. The research that I undertook for this thesis was a composite of in-depth interviews and a town-wide survey. For my interviews, I spoke primarily with women whom I had known from my time as a teacher, together with their family members whenever that was possible. However, my gender and my status as a young unmarried female in this region limited my ability to gain access to male informants (other than in the company of their family members) for, if I were to spend time alone with men in the village, I would be put into a socially compromising position. From my time as a teacher, I learned that the label of a “bad” woman typically applied to women who either drank or smoked publicly, or did not follow the local rules of sexual propriety. For this reason, the bulk of this paper will be focused on the cultural changes and gender role changes which are today occurring in the female population of Renu and Nong Yang and, by extension, the greater Isan.

In addressing this topic, it is relevant to note that there is a debate amongst academics as to whether the village gender role transformations negatively or positively affect village life and the well-being of Isan women. Andrea Whittaker, an anthropologist who did her research in the Isan province of Roi Et, argues that the rise of female urban migration is damaging to village women because it distances them from the kinship system and separates them from the spiritual role that they traditionally play in the rice-harvesting process. Within the region’s traditional
gender animist ideology, women have a strong association with female spirits, such as mae *thorani* ("mother earth") and mae *phosop* ("mother rice"). The appeasement of these female spirits is considered necessary for a bountiful harvest and for the protection of the household. As female migrants leave the village setting, it might be viewed that they lose the social power that this spiritual connection gives them. There are also female house spirits, or *phi sua*, that are associated with the women in residence and are thought to play a part in the female sexuality and the well-being of the household (Whittaker 1999:46-7). Whittaker is of the opinion that the loss of this spiritual connection, and the commodification of female labor, are both detrimental to the welfare of Isan women, because they are losing the power that the village social structure bequeaths them, while simultaneously being put in a more socially tenuous position as migrant workers (Whittaker 1999:59). This opinion differs from the ideas of other academics, such as Mary Beth Mills, who theorize that the rise of female urban migration is, in fact, empowering to many young Isan women because it allows them greater social and financial autonomy free from the constraints of the village power structures (Mills 1999:128).

With this debate in the background, I reach a general conclusion that the cultural / gender role changes promoted by female urban migration need not necessarily be categorized as either beneficial or detrimental. While urban migration might diminish the power Isan women are accorded through the village kinship system and traditional gender ideology, female migrants receive as a tradeoff new sources of social power from factors such as increased earning power and their experiences in the urban-setting.

This study was inspired in part by the works of scholars like Penny Van Esterik, Piya Pangsapa and Mary Beth Mills, each of whom has looked at how changes in gender roles occur as a result of Thailand’s modernization process. Van Esterik’s research examines how the media
promotes generational divides and westernization processes among Thailand’s female youth and specifically how Thai television programming and beauty contests have promoted a dichotomy between urban ideals of beauty and proper behavior, typically called \textit{thansamay}, and the rural traits that are frequently regarded as the antithesis of modernization. For example, according to Van Esterik, the Miss Thailand World and Miss Universe beauty contests are some of the most popularly televised programs each year. The women who win these competitions are marketed nationally and internationally as the epitome of Thai feminine beauty. Their images are utilized by agencies such as the Tourist Association of Thailand (TAT) to promote tourism, and since the 1930’s Thai beauty contestants have been promoted to represent an integral part in Thai nationalism (Van Esterik 1996). These women are judged on features such as whiteness of their complexion and the delicacy of their bone structure. Additionally, many of the contestants have both European and Thai heritage, or have spent a considerable amount of time abroad. For instance, the current Miss World 2013, Kanyaphak Phokesomboon, was born in Thailand but grew up in Switzerland (Missworld). While women such as Phokesomboon represent the antithesis of the rural rice farming girl, it is just such women that the Thai state and media promote as being the ideal modern Thai woman. The word \textit{thansamay}, in Thai, means modern. While most frequently applied to women, this adjective can also be used to describe things such as electronics, clothing fashions and other objects that are demonstrative of an individual’s financial affluence. The \textit{thansamay} woman is a particularly potent symbol of Thailand’s modernization, because this image is displayed repeatedly over a range of modern locales, including: the media, beauty contests, beauty salons, and shopping malls. Unfortunately, the \textit{thansamay} woman is also associated with places like nightclubs and cafés – sites that are frequently linked with Thailand’s commercial sex industry (Van Esterik 1988).
Mills and Pangsapa, meanwhile, have used some of Van Esterik’s insights to delve into the cultural changes that are occurring specifically within the female migrant worker population and, in particular, how Thai women of rural origin strain to adjust to urban living standards and become *thansamay* women or modern women. Both latter academics have also done extensive fieldwork on female migrant workers in the urban setting and have looked at how the migration process has brought with it an increase in female independence within the worker population. They both found that – despite the fact that factory workers often endure harsh working conditions and face issues of labor exploitation – the factory setting can also become a place of empowerment for Thai women, as it provides a setting in which women can come to question or outright reject some of the ideals of feminine behavior with which they were brought up or engage in forms of active resistance to labor practices (Mills 1999, Pangsapa 2007). By way of extension, in Thailand, as in other places such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia (Gamburd 2010; Ong 1987), there are other incidences of worker protests which, not surprisingly, are usually directly and most immediately attributable to the harsh working conditions in the factories. Exacerbating worker exploitation, the decentralization that accompanies subcontracting in the textile and technology industries has served to increase the problems of working conditions and low wages that Thai migrants face. In the fallout of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, many of these problems escalated, as factory owners came under increased pressure to turn out profits and remain afloat, and often sought to cut costs by decreasing workers’ wages and working conditions. Yet, even with all of these widespread and well-known problems, we still see a continual increase in urban migration. What, then, is it that draws migrant workers, and draws them particularly to urban factory work?
The first and most obvious answer is that these workers migrate because - even with the harsh working conditions and sometimes unstable pay - the salaries that they can make in the urban setting exceed the earnings that they could obtain in their rural villages. However, Pangsapa and Mills both argue that many women become migrant workers not solely for the increased economic benefits, but also in search of greater independence and mobility. As later chapters in this thesis will show, this increased drive towards independence has great implications for a generational divide within rural villages, as younger generations are coming of age with the expectation – encouraged by cultural and media influences - that they will migrate to the city.

My interest in this subject matter stems from my own background growing up in the northeastern US. In the nineteenth century, the Northeast was the center of America’s industrialization progress, with mill towns springing up along the seaboard wherever there was sufficient river water flow to power a mill. During this time, the northeastern farmers were also suffering because of the harsh climate and rocky soils, and agricultural production westward. In order to support their families, many New England girls traveled to towns like Lowell, Massachusetts, where they would work in the mills and send remittances back to their families. As many copycat mill towns sprang up throughout New England over the century, working conditions declined in the mills and led to rise of worker protests and worker unionization. When we compare this history to the state of textile and technology factories in contemporary Thailand, we see many similarities, especially in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which – like the increased competition of the other mill towns – made labor positions more tenuous, led to a decline in working conditions in many of the urban factories, and was followed by increased worker dissatisfaction.
Over the past century and a half, many New England mill towns have declined as textile manufacturing has been shipped overseas to countries – like Thailand. In my own hometown of Milton, Massachusetts, the Lower Mills area (where I was raised) has gone through a series of transformations – from a textile mill, to a chocolate factory, to now unused buildings or newly renovated condominiums for Boston commuters. This transformation process, which is occurring in many mill towns, like Lowell, throughout New England, is a something that I grew up witnessing and made me aware of the overall benefits and losses that occur in a country’s industrialization process.

When I was first living in Thailand, and teaching English in the Isan province of Nakon Phanom, I noticed cultural changes and migration-driven changes occurring in patterns similar to what happened in New England a century and a half before. Today, in Thailand, we are seeing the middle part of this process. These rural communities are departing from the kinship-based social systems under which they traditionally operated, and are now showing signs of shifting to economic-based systems and this, in turn, has prompted rural village cultures to adjust accordingly.

In Thailand, “modernization” is frequently thought of as being synonymous with progress, but this conflation overlooks how this trend promotes both underlying social frictions and cultural change. In Thailand, several studies have documented how the rise of female urban migration has led many female migrant workers to question some of the fundamental values of propriety and filial piety that they were brought up to believe epitomized proper female behavior. However, such studies focus primarily on the workers themselves and, in order to understand how Thailand’s migration flows are altering the origin communities of these workers (and how the social structures of rural communities are shifting to accommodate urban migration), for both
better and worse, it is necessary to turn our focus to these rural communities. This shift is prompted in part by the fact that, in the present-day, greater connectivity and transportation access means that these workers are not necessarily isolated in their new urban setting, but continue to have ties to, and retain some presence in, their rural communities. The choices that they make for themselves, in terms of their employment, lifestyle and social outlook, have significant ramifications for the communities from which they originate.

By looking at the changes occurring in the rural communities of migrant workers, we can see that the transformations following the country’s development process do not arise solely because increased urban migration has brought about greater female independence and an alteration of gender roles in rural communities. The changes and their causes extend beyond these two elements, as this thesis aims to show.

Drawing from both ethnographic and sociological research, as well as my own experiences in the town of Renu Nakon, and its adjacent village of Nong Yang Sin, this thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter offers some basic background information on Thailand’s industrialization process in the past half-century and the transformations to the Thai rural communities that have occurred during this time. It briefly reflects on the rise of female urban migration in Thailand and how this relates to migration patterns in several other Asian countries. The second chapter looks at the changes to social and economic structures that are occurring in the rural communities like Renu as a result of the area’s increase in urban migration, and how these changes are attributable to a generational divide amongst Isan women as the younger population is encouraged to abandon village life for urban employment. The third chapter will look at the gender role and power relation changes occurring within the Isan home and village, and how the rise in urban migration has shifted many of the traditional care-giver
roles, calling into question the gender hierarchies that have traditionally governed village life.

Finally, the conclusion will briefly discuss how urban migration could affect Isan communities and households in the future, and why this subject matter deserves continued attention.
Chapter 1- The Development of Urban Migration in Thailand and Other Asian Countries

Introduction:

The ongoing cultural changes occurring in rural Isan household and village structures are taking place within the context of Thailand’s current process of modernization and the global trend of increased female worker migration. Financial changes in the Thai economy have encouraged the rise in female urban migration among rural Isan women. This trend of urban migration is both similar to and different from such trends in other Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. It is also necessary to ground this comparison in the experience, strains, and changes that Thai migrants undergo in the urban context. This chapter will look at these aspects of Thai urban migration in order to provide a background for the ongoing changes occurring in rural households and villages resulting from increased migration. The first section will look primarily at Thailand’s economic development, paying special attention to what has been termed the “free land deficit”, and the concurrent industrialization in urban centers. We will then turn to look at Thailand’s development process in light of migration trends and issues in several other parts of Asia. Finally, we will look at the Thai migrant experience as a whole, including: the motivation of workers travelling to urban areas; the relationship of Isan migrants, in particular, to the other migrant populations in Thailand; the strains migrants endure in the urban context; and the repercussions in their rural hometowns. In sum, the three sections of this chapter are intended to provide some background information in exploring the changes and social tensions arising in Isan village and household social systems as a result of the region’s increased urban migration, and how these changes relate to urban Thai workers.
Thailand’s Development

In the past half-century, Thailand has gone through rapid development. The focus has been primarily in urban centers, most prominently Bangkok, where there has been a significant boom in industry and construction accompanied by a rise in urban migration. Starting in the 1950s, Thailand’s rapid population growth placed considerable stress on rural incomes and led most immediately to a fractionalization of land tenancy as family plots of land were subdivided as a result of intergeneration transfers. As a result of this land subdivision, heirs were left with “economically untenable plots” (Singhanetra-Renard 1982: 20). At the same time, the disparity between the rural and urban wage levels encouraged more and more people to migrate to the urban centers (Ouyyanont 1998:102). This focus upon urban development is attributable to both the increasing unprofitability of the rice industry (and subsistence agriculture) and to the land shortages increasingly experienced by rural populations. Shortages of arable land in Thailand can further be attributed to the transition from family-held to commercial land plots, and to the fact that relatively little new land has been cleared post-WWII to compensate for population increases (Tongudai 1982:21).

Thai family land traditionally is divided amongst the children after the parents pass away (Potter 1977: 53). Within land inheritance schemes, sons and daughters both inherit land from their parents, but sons often are given preference over their sisters and receive larger rice fields. As a result of the arable land shortage in proportion to an increasing population and environmental factors, by 1987 over half the agricultural households in Thailand faced rice shortages (Singhanetra-Renard 1987: 260). In some cases, richer siblings in rural Thai families were able to buy and consolidate their family’s holdings, but poorer siblings became landless and were left either to become hired labor or look to other industries for employment. Additionally,
as new farming technologies and equipment, such as tractors, have become increasingly popular as a way of reducing operating costs, the demand for hired labor has declined. For many rural Thais, escaping these land-holding problems has also become progressively difficult because the new harvesting technologies and labor divisions have exacerbated economic differences in the populations of rural areas and have caused many villagers to go into debt. This problem is very common in the Isan region, where local populations have long lagged nationally in earning power (Whittaker 1999:44).

At the same time as it was becoming increasingly difficult for rural villagers to support themselves solely from agriculture, new employment opportunities arose in more urban areas as international companies set up production sites. Urban migration from Isan and other rural regions of Thailand was also encouraged by the state and by education policies that were oriented towards providing younger generations of Thais with skill sets appropriate for urban-based employment (Chotisukan 1994: vi). As a result of Thailand’s industrialization and urban migration in the past fifty years, Thailand’s labor market has risen exponentially even as Thailand’s agricultural market has declined and become increasingly unprofitable for many families. In the 1980s, manufacturing eclipsed agriculture as Thailand’s GDP primary source, as Thailand increasingly became a site for international electronic and textile manufacturing (Singhanetra-Renard and Prabhudhanitisarn 1992: 154). In 1981, there were approximately 38,000 manufacturing complexes in the Thailand – by 1999 there were 1,645,000 establishments in Bangkok alone (Pangsapa 2007:27).
Female Worker Migration in Asia

Any discussion of urban development, land shortage problems and the decline of subsistence farming in Thailand should be placed in a broader context, for similar developments can be found in countries such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia and others. In these countries, the income generated from agricultural production no longer easily supports families and, as a result, more and more people (women in particular) are migrating to urban centers or other countries in search of employment (Wolf 1992; Lynch 2007). Due to pervasive gender stereotypes increased urban migration has disproportionately affected female laborers, who are often recruited for such reasons to positions in textile factories, technology factories, and domestic work. Feminine traits of docility and dexterity are thought to make women ideal employees in both industrial and domestic settings (Ong 1987, 1991).

A brief consideration of how increased female urban migrations have affected other Asian and Southeast Asian communities will be useful in determining the areas where the Thai case follows patterns evident elsewhere. In analyzing the various examples of female urban migration in Asia, it important to look at how migrants are affected by the bureaucratic, societal motivations, and labeling trends within various countries.

While the Thai government promotes worker migration, its involvement in migrant employment appears to be less than other Asian countries such as China or the Philippines. For example, in China - which has the largest internal worker urban migration in the world – the employment of migrant factory workers, or dagongmei, is highly variable depending upon the governmental policy and company hiring practices, which can vary even from day to day (Ngai 2005). While many Chinese rural families and villages are dependent upon the remittances that
their urban-based family members provide, these migrant workers are only able to attain employment if they receive permission to travel to other states within China, and even then may be denied access to essential social services in the new locale. The Philippines, meanwhile, offers an example of a government that actively encourages international migrant movement and employment. The Filipino government’s encouragement of worker migration comes from the fact that the largest percentage of the country’s annual GDP comes from the remittances that its internationally employed citizens send back to their families. As a result, the state is very supportive and there are many agencies that help Filipinos find international employment in fields like domestic service (Constable 2007; Lan 2006). Although China and the Philippines offer examples of migration that is regulated and encouraged, the Thai government – while it has some migration policies and development programs – does not efficiently monitor or oversee the urban migration of its workers, and much of urban employment and hiring stems from the initiative of the workers, their families and the employers.

Urbanization and related increased worker migration is seen in many Asian countries, but the underlying reasons often vary from populace to populace. Frequently, there is the tendency for people to oversimplify migration patterns through the justification of what Diane Wolf named the “family economy ideology” (Wolf 1992: 15), which refers to the argument that workers choose to migrate to cities for the sole purpose of supporting the family economic system. This justification, which ignores the personal agency and the non-economic desires of workers, is frequently applied to the cases of female Asian worker migration because, in countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, women are frequently major players in the family economies. In her analysis of factory daughters and industrialization in Java, Wolf problematized this idea of “family economy ideology” and showed that, more often than not,
women are drawn to industrial employment for a variety of reasons including: having their own earning power; greater personal independence; the desire to follow trends of modernity; as well as the desire to offer economic support to their families. Wolf argues that factory employment has strengthened workers’ “autonomy”, but, at the same time, this freedom is conditional because it is “limited to the economic realm” and does not necessarily extend to household politics (Wolf 1999:216). Likewise, the level of worker autonomy is similarly place and context dependent. While rural Javanese workers might experience greater social freedom in the factory setting, in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, Filipina domestic workers are routinely subject to the strict rules of their employers and are rarely allowed much freedom of movement beyond their workplace. As a result, many Filipina workers do not remain in their positions because of the experience and freedom that living abroad provides, but rather are primarily financially motivated and, in some cases, can become trapped within the migration cycle because a remittance dependence has developed in their origin communities (Constable 2007; Lan 2006). As the following section will show in greater detail, Thai migrant workers encounter all of these various types of motivations.

Finally, a recurrent pattern that can be seen in female migrant worker populations across nations is the development of stereotypes about these women and their lives. Frequently, such stereotypes are negative and are closely associated with perceptions regarding sexual activities and independence. Such stigmatizations arise in both the work setting and the origin communities of these women. As Constable, Lan and Ong have shown, when the negative stereotypes of female workers (Constable and Lan focused on domestic workers in particular) occur within the work setting, they often come as a result of the sexual threat that these workers are perceived to pose to their employers or by the close association that migrant workers often
have with an area’s sex industry workers. Within Hong Kong, for instance, many female employers of Filipina domestic workers harbor fears that these workers might tempt the men of the household into a sexual relationship. Therefore, many workers often have to follow strict dress code policies and are criticized if they try to adorn themselves or use cosmetics. It does not help that such fears gain some measure of credibility because many Filipina women do work in the sex industry in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, these same stigmatizations of migrant workers can often reverberate in the origin communities as well, promoting the same sort of social tension there that exists in the workplace. As the following chapters will demonstrate, much of this social tension among migrant workers and their home communities arises from the fact that the migrants are working outside the observation of their communities. As a result, their families cannot be sure whether the migrants are, in fact, working as maids or factory workers, or whether they have found alternate sources of income.

The social tension surrounding female migrant workers often amounts to a dichotomization of the migrant worker image, meaning that the worker can be either a loyal and respectful employee or a dangerous libertine woman. Lynch and Ong have explored this bifurcation in the images of migrant factory workers. In the case of Sri Lankan factory workers, this dichotomy even takes on the nomenclatures of the “Good Girl”, or the girl who does not engage in premarital sex and is morally upright, and the “Juki girl”, or the factory worker, who is thought of as a hyper-sexualized worker who no longer follows the behavioral codes of her kin (Lynch 2007: 11). This disparity is present within the Isan communities of migrant workers as well, and is closely related to many of the social changes that are occurring in both the Thai migrant community and the origin communities. The following section will explore what life is
like for Thai urban migrant workers, and will show that many of the trends with regard to migrant workers mentioned in this brief overview are also present in Thailand.

*Urban Migration in Thailand*

This section presents a brief synopsis of the Thai migrant worker – particularly the female migrant worker – and examines multiple aspects of the migrant experience including: what motivates migrants, how migrant labor has increased in the past half-century, how some migrants strive to become more *thansamay* (or modern) in the urban context, how Thai migrant workers relate to other migrant labor forces in Thailand, and the stresses that migrants endure (and at times protest) in the urban setting. Migrant worker issues discussed in this section are intended to serve as background for the discussion in the second and third chapters when we will look at the social changes occurring in the rural Isan context as a result of the rise in urban migration.

For rural Thai women, becoming a migrant worker (in place of agricultural labor) is an appealing option since working in an urban factory, for example, provides a source of income independent from the unpaid labor of family rice fields and relieves financial strain on the family (Mills 1999: 87; Tongudai 1982: 182; Ghosh 1990). Rural Thai development projects have in the past frequently excluded female laborers. Although women have traditionally assisted their families during times such as the rice harvesting season, they are not necessarily considered a part of the permanent rural labor network.

The rise of female urban migration in Thailand has been a consistent pattern for the past thirty years, so much so that, in many families, it is anticipated that the daughters will move to places like Bangkok in their early adulthood. In non-rural Thailand, women have an easier time
finding gainful employment than men for a number of reasons, including their lower salary demands. For example, the female migrant workers from Nong Yang and Renu reported that their salary was 200 baht per day (approximately US$6) in a factory, as opposed to the 300 baht per day (approximately US$9) that a man would be paid for comparable work.

The number of migrant women in Thailand has substantially increased over the last twenty years or so. In 1987, 40% of migrant workers were women, but this proportion has risen over the past few decades. Presently, it is estimated that 57.1% (1.3 million) of urban migrant workers are women (Singhanetra-Renard 1987:269; Devasahayam 2009:43). These women tend to fall within the age range of 15-24, with the majority of workers falling within the 20-24 age range group (Nirathron and Raviwongse 1994:12). In urban areas, migrants work in a variety of fields including: construction, domestic and lodging/leisure labor, and entertainment (Singhanetra-Renard 1987:269). Male migrant workers tend to hold employment positions in labor intensive industries, while women work in other sectors (Pongsapich 1988:5). Workers find their employment positions either via government officials from the Labor Department or, more commonly, through factory recruiters or familial connections (Singhanetra-Renard and Prabhudhanitisarn 1992:157; Tongudai 1982:79). Many migrants will find employment within two months of arriving in a city (Tongudai 1982:78), though statistics on this subject are unreliable because many migrant workers will return to their villages if they do not find immediate employment (Tongudai 1982:83).

As later chapters will explore, the rise of female urban migration – particularly from the Isan provinces – has caused many rural village economies to become remittance dependent, and this, in turn, has affected the length of stay and the cycles by which migrants travel back and forth between their hometowns and Bangkok or other cities. As more and more rural households
are becoming dependent upon the remittances that their children and wives send, an increasing number of women are either prolonging their employment in the city or choose to return to the city after having children (often leaving their children in the care of their parents) (Whittaker 2000:22). Women who are unmarried have an easier time finding employment, because many factory managers think that married women do not work as efficiently because they must also juggle their familial responsibilities (Pangsapa 2007:43). Consequently, some women who work in urban factories are putting off having children or are choosing not to get married at all (Pangsapa 2007:44). As a result of these changes, the worker migration patterns of twenty years ago, when workers would return to their hometowns after living in the city for a period of a few years (Mills 1999), are now changing as workers strive to retain their urban-factory positions, sometimes for up to fifteen years (Pangsapa 2007).

In the case of Thailand, we see a diversity of motivations that inspire women to move to the city. For many rural girls, however, there is a conditioned habitus where they are raised from an early stage to work for and financially support their families. In part, being a proper filial daughter dictates adherence to these social norms and promotes working in the city in order for a woman to better to support her family (Van Esterik 2000; Mills 1999). Yet, as Pangsapa discovered in her experiences with Thai factory workers, it is an oversimplification to say that these workers migrate to the city solely out of economic necessity. Furthermore, like the Javanese women in Wolf’s study, it should not be assumed that women in particular take up this arduous pattern primarily from a sense of filial piety. While Thai women are usually polite and unassuming in dealings with foreigners or strangers, they are not without their own personal agency as well (Pangsapa 2007). This is particularly the case once they begin to live in the urban setting. Being physically beyond the eyesight of the village network enables these women to
have greater independence and freedom in terms of their monetary expenditures, fashion choices, and personal relationships (Mills 1999).

Like migrant workers in the Philippines, Indonesia, and elsewhere, Thai migrant workers experience changes in lifestyle when they move to cities, notably Bangkok, and adjust to the urban wages and living standards (Mills 1999). Thai migrant workers frequently will live together in apartment or factory housing complexes and, as a result, influence and encourage each other to follow many of the urban trends that they see projected in the Thai media. As Mary Beth Mills has reported, urban migrant workers will frequently start investing their extra funds in technologies such as television, in order to emulate the commonly projected images of “modern women”, or women who are thansamay – a term which not only refers to the living standards of these women, but also frequently pertains to personal appearance. Commonly, urban migrant workers, in adjusting to urban living, will emulate urban beauty standards – buying hair accessories, dressing more provocatively, using bleaching cream on their skin, and applying make-up (Van Esterik 2000). According to Mills, women in Thai culture, particularly thansamay women, “represent powerful images of modernity and moral degradation” (Mills 1998: 19). For many workers, however, projecting the thansamay image can become a source of social power (especially in the rural setting) because they are displaying both their wealth and showing that they are cosmopolitan. On the other hand, for older generations of villagers, the thansamay woman can represent the corruptive influences of urban living. Mills theorized that female migration forces migrants and their families to confront the commodified meanings and practices of being thansamay, “[and that] the gendered tensions and cultural tensions that result offer insight into not only the reproduction of power and cultural authority in contemporary
Thailand but also the ways in which these can be negotiated, contested, and (if only partially or temporarily) transformed” (Mills 1999:19).

We turn now to discuss how Thai migrant workers relate to other migrant populations within Thailand itself, to examine the transitions workers go through in the workplace, and to consider how such changes can have a ripple effect back in the rural setting. First, we will look at the kind of work Thai migrants undertake in urban settings; what sort of job competition they face (from Burmese and Cambodian migrants, for example); and how the stresses and freedoms they encounter in the city can cause them to reexamine and question social norms with which they have been raised.

Thai workers who migrate to cities such as Bangkok are of central importance to the textile, technology, and other urban industries. Other working populations that exist in these sectors include Burmese, Cambodian and Laotian workers. As of 2007, it was estimated that Thai industries employed over 1,800,000 foreign workers (Martin 2007). Frequently, there is an underlying tension between these foreign migrant populations and Thai workers due to job competition, wage contentions, etc. Foreign laborers, such as Burmese and Cambodians, are often undocumented and, therefore, employers do not have to abide by the wage levels applicable to Thai workers, and do not have to pay the taxes as they would if they employed Thai workers. Employers risk receiving a fine if their recruitment of illegal workers is discovered but, due to police corruption, are often alerted prior to factory raids and are thus able to move illegal workers away from the work site in advance. Furthermore, the trend towards subcontracting, especially within the textile industry, has led to an increase in small-scale factories in outlying cities such as Mae Sot, which primarily employ foreign migrants (Pearson and Kusakabe 2012).
This subcontracting has led to a further disintegration of industry regulations, and has made it increasingly difficult for Thai workers to pursue their employment rights.

In the wake of the 1997 market crash, employment for Thai migrant workers became more tenuous, because, as a part of the Thai government US$17.2 billion dollar bailout package, medium - to - large size factories were allowed to lower labor costs, and relax labor laws and regulations. Additionally, many factories switched their production methods from assembly line / overtime systems to piece-rate work systems; many larger urban factories began subcontracting to smaller factories (often based in less central provinces such as Ubon Ratchatani or Tak) with fewer worker restrictions. These subcontract factories hire fewer workers to do the majority of the labor, and then the products are shipped to and finished in the central Bangkok factories. For example, a shirt will be assembled in a subcontract factory and then shipped to Bangkok-based factory where the tag is sewn on. This subcontracting allowed Bangkok factories to decrease their labor force as much as 80%, in the aftermath of the 1997 crash and this development, coupled with new piece-rate work systems, has led to job competition amongst workers (Pangsapa 2007: 131-136).

As a result of increased job competition, there is a higher incidence of migrants working longer hours in more hazardous and unsanitary conditions. The most frequent complaints relate to unsanitary conditions in bathrooms, but workers also complain about things such as air quality in the factories or the monotonous nature their work. However, as their employment is tenuous, many workers are grateful to have a job, but working conditions and persistent job insecurity have also caused certain factions of the migrant populace to become increasingly frustrated (Pangsapa 2007). Thai workers’ frustrations are frequently exacerbated by bureaucratic procedures and the social prejudices that workers face. As most laborers who come to work in
Bangkok are not originally from urban centers, they are oftentimes initially unaware of their employment rights or do not know what avenues are open to pursue employment and contract rights (Mills 2005). This is changing slightly as there are an increasing number of worker NGOs and unions focusing on worker needs and rights. Not surprisingly, workers who are associated with such organizations or unions often run the risk of being laid off because they are viewed as disruptive. Therefore, workers who choose action face the question of whether they would be willing to jeopardize their job and possibly be blacklisted by employers.

The antagonism between the Thai migrant workers and their employers has in the past led to worker uprisings which not only express workers’ frustrations, but also promote social changes within the worker populace. These protests lead many migrants to question cultural standards of piety with which they were raised, and this is especially true for female migrant populations. In her essay “From Nimble Fingers to Raised Fists”, Mills examines how worker demonstrations – such as the protest letter that workers wrote to the prime minister in blood – signal more than just worker dissatisfaction with labor conditions and wages. Rather, they show that the factory setting provides a location in which workers reexamine their thoughts and beliefs on servility and filial piety. Here, a conflict arises. The majority of workers migrate to the city, in part, to gain a higher paying position so that they are better able, as a familial matter, to offer financial support to their parents. By protesting against their employers, these workers are not only putting their employment at risk, but are also abandoning many of the traditional Thai beliefs that prioritize familial support and respect for authority figures.

Beyond their frustrations in the workplace, Thai female migrant workers – like female migrant workers in other Asian countries – often have to endure a certain amount of stigmatization that seemingly goes hand-in-hand with the respect that they gain as a result of
greater earning power. Women workers are respected, at least in the rural setting, because of the central role they play in the household and village economies. At the same time, the high incidence in Thailand of prostitution and human-trafficking frequently taints the public perception of migrant workers since, as noted above, families of migrant workers can never be quite sure whether their daughters are working in legitimate trades or in the entertainment industry (Whittaker 2000:40). Thailand’s cultural norms, in relation to saving face and open acceptance of evading the truth, adds an additional layer of complication in terms of how many Thais perceive and think about female migrant workers, since sex workers would never openly admit to their family members that they are working in the entertainment industry (Whittaker 2000; Mills 2005). As we will explore later, the majority of Thai people are very aware of the profitability of the country’s sex industry, and this is especially applicable for people from Isan, from where the majority of Thai sex workers originate. At the same time, most Thai women would never feel comfortable openly admitting their profession, especially if they come from a rural village setting where such an admission would cause public humiliation for the woman and for her family as well. So, instead, what we see a pattern of open secrets, in which many Thais will speculate that a female migrant laborer might be working in the sex industry – especially if she returns to the village dressed in a more sexually provocative manner or if it seems that she is living above the means of a factory worker – but they will never confront the woman with their suspicions (Whittaker 2000). While there is this acceptance of the surface lie, this evasiveness also promotes an uncomfortable tension surrounding female migrants.

As a separate matter, the urban setting also promotes a rise of independence within the working populace, for these workers are not only financially independent but also are exposed to greater range of experiences, all the while living beyond the communal structure of the rural
village. This allows the workers themselves to have greater social movements because their lives are not monitored by the village gossip chain and the restrictions that the village can sometimes impose (Mills 1999). This is particularly true for Thai women who, in the village, often feel pressured to adhere to the dress and behavioral standards of the older generation. In an urban setting, these issues are substantially reduced. At the same time, it is important to note that workers in the urban setting are only partially beyond the village communal structure, since many workers obtain their employment position through familial networks. As a result, Thai workers must navigate this social space where they are both beyond the familial viewership but still connected to their kin socially. This means that, especially with technological advances like cellphones, workers in the city still live under the threat that, if they ever truly go against social norms, word could travel back to their families in Isan villages. With that said, there still exist some social expectations that urban workers will adopt more modern styles of dress and social behavior, for it is understood that many workers travel to Bangkok and other urban areas in the hope of becoming more cosmopolitan and therefore more modern.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly explained the twentieth-century emergence of the rural Thai migrant worker, in the context of similar tales of migrant workers throughout Asia, and how the urban setting has promoted changes within the worker populace. In the following chapters, we will look at how such changes reverberate back to the rural Thai communities – in particular Isan communities – promoting generational divides and new codes of conduct both within the household and within the village. Furthermore, we will look at how the increased female urban
migration has promoted both new definitions of gender roles within the rural context and evolving social structures.
Chapter 2 – The Effects of Urban Migration on the Isan Village

Introduction

In my introduction and Chapter 1, we looked briefly at how some aspects of development in Thailand compare to patterns elsewhere, and how Thailand’s industrialization and urbanization has encouraged migration from rural to urban areas, particularly among Thai women. As previously noted, in Thailand many of the migrant workers come from the northeastern provinces of Isan, where gainful employment opportunities are a rarity outside of the agricultural sector, which principally consists of rice-growing. While several academics have investigated the changes and challenges that these migrant workers experience while in the cities, comparatively little research has been done on how Isan village and households have adjusted to the continuing exodus of migrant workers.

Here we will look at the social changes occurring in rural communities of Isan, particularly the town of Renu Nakon and its adjacent village of Nong Yang Sin. It will focus specifically on how the rise of urban migration (predominantly female urban-migration) from Renu and Nong Yang has led to changes within their economic systems, their social organization and their culture.

By looking at the case studies of Nong Yang and Renu, this chapter will investigate how the convergence of economic and social shifts has led to underlying frictions. The data for this section comes partly from my own research and experience in the region, as well as the research of authors such as Andrea Whittaker and Mary Beth Mills.
Agrarian Management and Economic Systems of Isan Villages

While it is not the only crop that is commercially harvested, rice is the staple crop of Isan and, as a result, the economic and labor systems of many villages have traditionally been dictated by the rice harvesting cycle and the labor needed at these times. For many Isan villagers, rice harvesting provides not only an important part of their income, but is also a cultural symbol for the region, connected to many religious and regional identities. Currently, however, there is a shift occurring in many Isan villages due to the incursion of new farming techniques and technologies, as well as the increasing importance of remittance-based income as a portion of village revenue. Furthermore, the cultural importance of rice harvesting has diminished as it is decreasingly tied to familial labor networks. Here, we look at how the labor systems of these villages have previously functioned compared to how they work today, and how this change has led to new economic perspectives.

In Thailand, there are typically one to two major rice harvests per year (depending largely on whether farmers have the resources to install irrigation systems during the dry months of the cool and hot seasons), with the larger harvesting time occurring during the month of October. It has traditionally been common for migrants (even those who might be employed in urban areas) to return to their origin communities to assist their family members (both immediate and extended) in rice processing at that time (Fuller 1983:40). Besides the Thai New Year Songkran festival, and the Julian calendar New Year holiday period, harvesting has been one of the peak periods for family members to return to their villages (Tongudai 1982:165). In the past as well as the present-day, labor is in great enough demand that the school schedule permits a term break
at this time, in part because it is widely acknowledged that, if school were to continue in session during this month, many parents would take their children out of school to assist in the harvest.

The rice harvest process has traditionally been a communal event (as well as one in which there are gender labor divisions), but lately this has been transforming due to labor shortages / costs and farming advances. In the Isan provinces, as in other parts of Thailand, rice harvesting has traditionally occurred on the family-held land. Parents would often rely upon their children, as well as members of the extended family, to assist in the fields. Many labor divisions in rural Thai village economies generally fall along gender divisions, and in rice harvesting women are thought to be better suited physically to cutting the rice stalks with small hand-held scythes, while men often handle more labor intensive activities such as dredging canals (Potter 1977: 56; Mills 1999:77). Meanwhile, when it is not harvesting or planting season, women will frequently manage side businesses, such as shops and hair parlors, which help the family income during lean times (Potter 1977). While these responsibilities are partly due to gender role stereotypes that lay more physically demanding tasks at the feet of men, while women are expected to perform tasks that require greater delicacy, there are also local animist beliefs which come in to play. As women are believed to be akin to female spirits like mae phosop (mother rice), their participation in the reaping and sowing process is believed to yield larger harvests.

At present, however, we see a shift occurring in Isan, as in other rural parts of Thailand. The younger generation is less inclined to continue to be involved in rice harvesting, or family land-ownership patterns have changed such that not all families have rice to harvest, or the familial labor network is not enough to sustain the harvesting process. In order to compensate
for this decrease in labor availability, farmers are forced to choose between several options. Firstly, as the familial labor network is becoming increasingly untenable, many families are now finding it easier to hire laborers to assist in the rice harvest. Secondly, the increasing availability of small tractors has enabled many farmers to harvest with less human labor. Tractors are also often cheaper than hiring laborers but, in obtaining such equipment, farmers are frequently forced to borrow. Families who cannot afford either a tractor or a hired laborer must try to do the harvest by themselves. In looking at past statistics, we can infer that the shortage in the labor network can be attributed in part to several factors: a general birthrate decline, the rise in urban migration and the increasing numbers of delayed marriages amongst rural women – particularly women who become migrant workers (Debavalya 1980:81). The rise in delayed marriages affects the labor network numbers because Isan marriages serve to unite kinship and labor networks (Potter 1977). Therefore, women who chose to become migrant workers are not only depriving their family of their own labor but, as they are not marrying, they are depriving their family of extended kinship-labor resources.

The declining need for human labor in rice harvesting has contributed to social structure changes and the emergence of a generational divide in Renu and Nong Yang. In northern Thailand, Potter has stated that, in fact, the ultimate social rejection is not being included in the rice harvesting process, for the idea of “cuaj kan”, or “cooperation”, is a fundamental theme of social relationships (1976:42). Being turned away from the rice harvest represents social ostracization. The villagers in Renu and Nong Yang similarly maintain “cuaj kan” as a guiding principle to how they lead their daily lives – they work together in rice harvests and they share surplus crops with their neighbors. Consequently, the decline of the village labor network (and its resulting change to the rice harvesting practice) signals more than just a departure from
former labor systems; it makes a significant change in how Isan people relate to and socialize with one another. In this context, it is understandable that many older villagers from Nong Yang and Renu take issue with the younger generation not wanting to continue the rice-harvesting lifestyle, because it is essentially a form of rejection or abandonment of the social mores and structures that have historically governed village life.

Older Isan villagers still see rice harvesting as an important part of local culture, while younger members of the population are more concerned with achieving urban employment and emulating an urban-lifestyle that they see projected through the media. While the rice harvest is still a time when families and their neighbors will go out to the fields to work as a community, the younger generation of Renu and Nong Yang will often comment that they would prefer to be in the internet cafes or watching television, and that they do not wish to continue to work in the fields when they are older. Furthermore, the darker Isan complexions, which is commonly associated with sun exposure one sustains from rice farming, is a point of national stigmatization of the Isan population, for they are visually distinguishable as laborers rather than members of the urban elite (Mills 1999). These cultural stereotypes are often projected in the mass media and discourage younger Isan villagers from continuing rice harvesting or engaging in other outside labor. The divergence of opinions within generations of villagers over participation in rice harvesting accompanies the rise in urban migration and the mounting generational divide in Nong Yang and Renu, which will be covered in greater depth below.

Presently, many Renu and Nong Yang residents are at a crossroads, trying to decide whether they should continue rice harvesting, and encourage their children to do the same, or whether they should be inspired to migrate in search of other employment. For some villagers, this
decision is especially difficult because, while the abandonment of the rice-village lifestyle can be interpreted as an abandonment of many of the codes of conduct with which they were raised, they also recognize practically that, given the direction of the country’s development, there is limited future for their children as rice farmers.

By way of example, we turn to the case study of Pri, a young mother and school teacher who lives and works in Nong Yang Sin. Pri went to university in Bangkok and worked in insurance there during her early twenties, before returning home to her village to raise her son because she believed that the village was a safer and happier place to raise children. When she lived in Bangkok, Pri regularly sent remittances back to Nong Yang to support her parents; and now her brother, a clerk who works in Bangkok, does the same. I became close with Pri when we shared a classroom space during my time as a teacher in Nong Yang. In sharing this classroom, we bonded because we assisted each other during our lessons, and also we were because we were two of the younger school staff members. Likewise, in our personal lives we frequently came to each others’ aid. When her parents couldn’t look after her son, I would care for him while she taught, and when I needed transportation help either getting to the market or the local bus stop, Pri would always be there to help me. As a person who had resided in Bangkok, but chose to return to the village because of the safety it provided, Pri also served as useful source information. She understood why some elder villagers resented Bangkok’s cosmopolitan influence upon the younger generation and, while she valued to safety of village life, she was also very aware of its economic and social limitations.

While her mother was a seamstress and her father worked in education (and her father had in fact been a senior-ranking provincial educational official), Pri had a typical upbringing for
a Nong Yang Sin villager. In addition to their other professions, Pri’s parents, like most families in Nong Yan Sin, had rice farms on which she grew up working during her free time outside of school. Pri acknowledged that rice harvesting was formative part of her development because it showed her the value of “hard work” and communal cooperation. Now, as an adult, Pri is saddled with the problem of giving her son the best opportunities she can, while also trying to root him in the same sense of community with which she was raised and which she has come to value at this stage in her life. In her words, “I want him to get a good job in the city - but I will also have him work in the rice fields here when he gets old enough, because it is important that he knows how hard it is to work in the fields and he understands how hard people work in Nakon Phanom.”

The movement away from agriculture-based to remittance-based income, and the shift in from familial-network to hired labor organization schemes, signals more than just an economic shift in Nong Yang Sin. These changes extend to the how the village organizes itself and functions. The communal labor pool shifts as remittance-based income becomes a more powerful force, and the way that many villagers relate to one another also shifts slightly.

A survey I performed in Nong Yan Sin indicated that over 4/5ths of the people polled thought it was a good idea to go and work in Bangkok, even though the majority of the people polled worked in agriculture or education (or both, as is often the case). Of the people polled, over half already had family members working in Bangkok or other urban areas. The overwhelming majority stated that they thought working in Bangkok or having family members working there brought a positive change to village economic system. When asked their reasons, most people came back with the simple response, “to find money is good”; while some people
would extend this answer to include “finding money to give to one’s family is good”. The overall message was the same: the lack of economic opportunities in Isan, and in Nong Yang Sin in particular, means that the urban migration of younger population is increasingly seen as a necessity for many village families. This represents a dramatic change of opinion on urban employment that has come about in the past 30 years. As a point of comparison, a 1980 Bank of Thailand report on the economic role of Thai women showed that 50% of the rural women wanted to go into agriculture, while 15% wanted to go to work in factories and only 4% 8 wanted to become house-maids (Meesook 1980:15). In the following sections, we will look at how these changes in the economic and labor systems of Isan villages have caused social changes and tensions.

Social Structure

The shift in economic perspectives and systems of Renu and Nong Yang Sin has done more than cause changes in the agricultural labor systems. It opens a new source of revenue for many families, and thus can influence and even change the hierarchies of the village. In this section, we will outline how social and gender hierarchies were traditionally dictated in Isan villages, and compare that to how they presently function.

Traditionally, a family’s social ranking drew directly from the size of family landholdings. To explain this connection, in addition to the obvious economic implications, it is first useful to give a brief overview of the merit making system in Theravada Buddhism. In Theravada Buddhism, one makes merit, or bun, in order to ensure that one progresses when one is reincarnated in his or her next life. A person can make merit through a number of different

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8 Of this 4%, the majority of women who indicated that they wished to become housemaids came from the Isan region.
ways: becoming a monk, feeding and clothing the monks, or supporting the *wat*, or temple. In Isan culture, making merit is closely tied to both gender hierarchies (which will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter) and social hierarchies. As much of the village life was structured around the *wat* and agriculture, people who were major landowners in the village have historically had a high social ranking, not only because they were able to donate to and support the *wat* / monks, but also because their landholder status also meant that they frequently have leisure time to spend at the temple organizing social events (Potter 1976). Presently, however, we see shifts in the traditional landholding hierarchy, as the importance of the rice industry is diminishing and as non-landholding families are becoming increasingly wealthy from the remittances their migrant family members send to them.

Exacerbating the shift in village social hierarchies is the increasing cultural importance now being placed upon one’s income and spending capacity. Mary Beth Mills and other ethnographers of the region have observed that the adoption of the commercial styles and practices of the city brings a certain amount of social prestige because it is a display of one’s wealth – what we could interpret as an alternative to landholding status (1999: 55). Migrant workers who return to the village after living in the city wearing urban fashions, for example, are afforded increased social status due the wealth that they are perceived as able to bring to the community and the *wat*.

As referenced above, gender hierarchies are shifting as well as social hierarchies due to the rise in urban migration. Like the social hierarchies of the village, gender hierarchies are intricately connected with the status of women in Buddhism. The gender hierarchies in Thailand are shaped by the notion of *kamma*, a religious concept which (among other things) defines male
birth order as being above the female birth order (Falk 2007: 8). For the most part, Thai gender roles are egalitarian, but *kamma* dictates what roles that women and men can play in the social structure of the village. For instance, while men are able to become monks and so are able to make merit for their kin, women are relegated to the supportive role for the male members of their families. As a result, women in Renu / Nong Yang inhabit key positions as household leaders, while men frequently are religious and public leaders (Tambiah 1970:127). In the Renu / Nong Yang area, in village life there are usually one or two key male figures who preside over auspicious occasions, such as weddings and communal meetings. Meanwhile, women in these towns control most of the events occurring within the household domain due to women’s association with / responsibility for the appeasement of female household spirits.\(^9\)

While these traditional gender hierarchies are still present in Isan towns and villages like Renu and Nong Yang, they are being challenged by both the rise of urban migration – particularly female urban migration – and some contemporary religious issues. Female migrant workers who are the principle earners for their families now hold increased social power because of the income they generate for the towns. At the same time, many of my informants told me that obtaining religious merit is becoming less important to them than achieving financial success. A clear indication of this can be seen in the shortening time span that local men will spend as a *samenera*, or a novice monk – a traditional rite of passage that most young men will undergo for a period of time in order to accumulate spiritual merit for themselves and their families (Falk 2007). In the past, young village men donned the saffron robes for periods of one

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\(^9\) Within the Phu Thai culture there is also a tradition of female healers known a *Mo Yao Ma Mueang*, or healer *yao* mother community. These healers are typically elder village women (each village usually contains one to two healers) and they are thought to heal people by communicating with the spirits. They also will serve the community by offering prayers to rain, ancestral and other spirits. Presently there is concern that this tradition of healing will be lost as Phu Thai communities have increased access to modern medicine and will seek out a physician’s care rather than a healer’s care when they fall ill (Mollerup 2011).
to two years. Increasingly today, this time period for many men has been shortened to a couple of months or even to as little as a couple of weeks, depending upon how much time the man in question can take off from work.\textsuperscript{10} It can be interpreted that the increasing importance of financial success over spiritual power has helped empower many female migrant workers in the community, beyond their traditional household realm, for they have an easier time finding employment and are often thought to support their rural communities, in economic terms, more reliably than their male counterparts.

While there are distinct gender role differences and social hierarchies in the Isan village, generally all participants within the village still tend to operate on a premise of mutual exchange and reciprocity. For instance, whenever my Nong Yang neighbors’ garden vegetables were ripe, they would come to my home and give me some produce. Likewise, it was expected that when my own star fruit and banana trees were in season, that I would reciprocate the favor and share my fruit with the community. This code of conduct stems from the fact that many Isan villages are comprised of a few central families. In fact, there are some villages, in provinces like Nakon Phanom, where people are not allowed to construct new homes unless they are a part of or married to a leading family in the village. This mandated familial connection creates a village network that is dually supportive and restrictive: while it is supportive, at the same time it creates a setting that reinforces existing gender / social hierarchies and codes of conduct. The following section will briefly describe how the village network functions and how it is changing as a result of urban migration.

\textsuperscript{10} This increased importance of financial success over spirituality might also be influenced by numerous stories of monk and temple corruption. These stories have become popular fodder for the Thai media and have tarnished the image of the monkhood.
The village of Nong Yang Sin is comprised of a few leading families, all living in close proximity to one another. Others, whose families do not reside in the village itself, more often than not have a core group of family members who live in an adjacent town (Potter 1976; Ghosh 1990). Familial proximity is beneficial for many villagers as they are able to lean upon their family members for assistance in raising their children or for helping to care for their elderly. Furthermore, many people in rural Isan villages will rely upon their close friends and neighbors in much the same way that they would their family members, for frequently close friendships are treated with almost the same level of respect as sibling relationships. Here, we will look at the changes occurring in the village networks of Renu and Nong Yang, to highlight some of the reasons why migrants return to the village, or wish to depart from it, and how their experiences / relationships during their time away affect the rural-urban network.

Many Thais who return to an Isan village, after either studying or working in urban centers, do so because of the support the village social structure gives them. When I asked Lad - a middle-aged teacher and rice farmer - why she and her husband (both of whom received higher degrees from urban universities) chose to settle down and have children in Nakon Phanom, she answered simply, “Because my family was here, and my family helped me watch over my children.” Lad’s family was able to assist her in this way because her parents and her sisters all live within close proximity of each other in Renu. She and her husband met as young adults working in Bangkok, and have been married for over 28 years. Both of Lad’s children are adults. Lad’s son works at the hospital in Thatphanom and lives in Nakon Phanom, and Lad’s daughter lives and works in Bangkok. At the time of my field research, Lad’s daughter had just
married a man who she met in her workplace. As Lad and I sat in her kitchen of her new house (a house funded in part by her daughter’s remittances), discussing her daughter’s future, she noted the change in the generations. For Lad and her sisters, returning to Renu to raise their children was not even a choice, it was something that they all were expected to do. This relocation meant that Lad and her husband had to change careers completely. Lad and her husband had both majored in science at university, but their degrees did them little good in Nakon Phanom, and so they both became teachers. Lad’s sisters also sacrificed in the same way, although at the time it was not even considered a sacrifice, but merely what was expected of them. For Lad’s daughter, on the other hand, the situation is different. Everyone in Lad’s family is very aware of the career opportunities she will be relinquishing if she decides to relocate to Renu when she and her husband decide to have children. Lad also understood that for her daughter this was not an easy decision. Lad’s daughter prefers to live in Bangkok because she finds Isan village life dull. Furthermore, her larger earning capacity in the city allows her to do things like help finance Lad’s and her husband’s new home for their retirement. For Lad and her husband, their retirement house, with its shiny white tiled floors and contemporary design, served as a status symbol in the community. However, while Lad appreciated the house, she also admitted to me that she wanted her daughter to return from Bangkok because, in her words, “The village network and the slower pace of life in Isan provides a better atmosphere to raise children.”

It is important to recognize that Lad is not only talking about having her children looked after in the household space, but is speaking communally as the various household positions of her family members extend their gaze throughout much of the town. For parents in the village, this sort of surveillance can prove quite useful. One does not need to worry about the toddler
wandering out of the house and into the street because the odds are that an auntie, uncle, or a neighbor will scoop up the child if motorcycles or trucks happen to drive past. Figure I provides a layout of the town of Renu and highlights the wide field of observation that Lad and her family encompass.

By looking at this figure, one can get a sense of how familial and village surveillance mitigates the level of serious crime in the villages, because there is very little space within the town that is not under observation. Indeed, when Pri spoke similarly of her motivations for returning to Nong Yang Sin, despite the fact that she was relinquishing a good job in insurance and her husband’s family was all based in Bangkok, she cited the lower danger of the country as being a significant motivation for her return. “In the city it is too dangerous. There are too many cars and too little space. In Nong Yang Sin I live next (door) to my parents and they can help watch out for my son.”
It is only on the outskirts of town that the level of social observation may falter, and for this reason many town residents believe that the outskirts are the places where “bad men” or “ghosts” reside. These superstitions also surround these areas because often these are the sites of socially illicit behavior such as pre-marital sex (Lyttleton 1999:33). In general, one is thought to become vulnerable to a ghost attack when beyond the supervision (and the implicit social restrictions) of other villagers. For instance, if a person is alone at home (especially at night), he or she is believed to be vulnerable to ghosts. As a result of these superstitions, areas where people go to retreat from the village surveillance (to engage in pre-marital sex or other acts that are socially frowned upon) become presumed sites of ghost attacks. Mary Beth Mills postulated that, in northeastern Thailand, superstitions about ghosts are often manifestations of social anxieties and fears. In her research, Mills investigates the rise of the popular belief in “widow ghost(s)” and how it reflects the village social stresses that occur as a result of female urban migration. These ghosts are thought to be women that have died in their travels and whose spirits then return to wreak havoc upon village men. In order to protect themselves from such spirits, many men in Mills’ study began to adorn their homes phallic ornaments in order to ward off attacks. This belief became popularized with the rise of female migration, because the increased mobility of women also increased the chances that women could be lost during their travels. In the interpretation of Mills, this belief is really a fear of female mobility (and implicit sexual freedom) and the threat it poses to the social positioning of village men (Mills 1995). We can also theorize that such ghost beliefs arise from the social fears provoked by female migrants abandoning the supervision of the village network.

As children get older, however, the pervasive surveillance by the community can sometimes feel oppressive. Adolescents who wish to rebel or assert their individuality by
dressing in urban fashions or smoking or drinking, very rarely get away with these indiscretions. The close proximity and vigilance of the village structure creates a system by which the younger generation feels under an obligation to adhere to the behavioral standards of their older generation family members, even outside of the household. There is an acknowledgment that observation is constant. At the same time, I observed younger villagers watching television shows produced in Bangkok for up to five hours a day, and they are reading about the modern or thansamay lifestyle of the urban world, where such pressures of observation do not exist in the same way. This especially true for girls, according to Lad, “In Bangkok the girls have greater freedom because in Isan [a girl’s] family / parents see more and have greater control. There are some girls who do not want to return to Isan because they do not want to give up their freedom”. As result, many younger residents wish to migrate to urban areas in the expectation of enjoying greater social freedom (Mills 1999).

The kinship networks of Renu and Nong Yang do not operate by visual observation alone, but also operate through village communication and gossip networks. To understand what gossip means within Isan culture, one first needs to recognize that there are relatively few daily activities available in the province of Nakon Phanom. When one is not working, in Nong Yang or Renu, it is common to spend entire days at a neighbor’s home, talking, drinking either coffee or whisky with soda water, and munching on local snacks. These long conversations will range widely from the mundane, such as the meal that each person prepared the day before, to more sensitive topics like discussions of infidelities amongst acquaintances. Given this range of conversations and the fact that very few topics are labeled as taboo, any resident can usually count on the fact that, during the course of a day, whatever actions are taken and whatever is done will be relayed to close kin within a few hours. There are very few occurrences in places
such as Renu and Nong Yang that are not quickly noted and which fail to provide fodder for conversation. At the same time, there is a prevalence of open secrets within the Thai gossip structure, usually regarding issues of infidelities and abuse. Due to the Thai cultural standard of saving face, these topics usually never amount to outright confrontations of the people directly involved, but instead rest as underlying – but commonly acknowledged – secrets. Indeed, the very close proximity in which the villagers live could be said to drive the need for elaborate social discretion in the face of what is, literally, common knowledge.

When migrant workers move to a city, in effect they challenge the functionality of this network as their level of participation becomes individually voluntary. Migrant workers are able to call their family members in the villages and talk to them about daily events, but what they choose to disclose is often theirs to decide. As we discuss in the following chapter, this change breeds a certain amount of distrust within the household setting, and it can seep into the greater kinship network. Parents will talk to their neighbors and relatives about their fears for their migrant worker children. In a similar vein, since migrant workers are no longer within direct and daily observation of their kin, their physical return to the village tends to unsettle the kinship network.

*The Kinship Circle Beyond the Village and Changes Near the Urban Setting*

While kinship networks within Isan villages are experiencing some destabilization due to the rise in urban migration, they are simultaneously expanding as a result of Thailand’s modernization. As a consequence of the increase in urban migration, we see that kinship networks are no longer limited to the village setting. Instead, these networks can now extend to urban areas as well, and what we see in this extension process is a disruption in how such
networks operate. Here, we will explore how the kinship networks of the village extend into urban areas like Bangkok, what adjustments have been made to these kinship systems as a result of this extension, and how this has an impact on the village setting.

While many Isan villagers migrate to the urban setting in search of greater independence, the increasing ease of communication and travel throughout Thailand means that the kinship surveillance network, depending on the circumstances, may continue to a greater or lesser extent from the village into the urban setting (Mills 1999). For migrant workers, this can occur in a number of ways. Firstly, as it has been discussed earlier many workers come to the city because they hear of job opportunities through their family members and friends who have already joined the migrant community. In taking such positions, they are to some degree still living within the confines of their pre-existing – if somewhat altered – social group and, if they start being involved in issues such as protesting management at their workplace (which would jeopardize the familial income), they run the risk of that information being relayed back to their villages (Mills 1999). Secondly, as a security measure, some Renu / Nong Yang parents, in sending their children down to the city either to work or to study, make a point to put in place arrangements with the family members / friends residing there. Villagers will do this partly in an effort to keep their migrating family members in touch with their roots. According to several of the people from Nong Yang Sin with whom I spoke, when people from Isan socialize in the urban setting, they still will speak in Phu Thai / Isan, eat Isan food, and otherwise behave in the same manner as they would in their villages. When Pri was working in Bangkok, going to her extended family members’ residence and speaking Phu Thai with her extended family not only helped mitigate some of her longings for home, but also gave her some relief from the urban discrimination she faced as a result of being from Isan. At the same time, one of the benefits of living in the urban
setting is that people like Pri only have to socialize in this way by their own desire, and otherwise can live in as much privacy as they would like – something that is not an option in the small village structure. When some migrants return to Renu and Nong Yang, they report that it is this absence of freedom and choice that is the hardest thing from which to readjust.

Finally, the ease of communication and transportation now enables a greater interchange between the urban migrant workers and their rural families. To put this in context, according to Lad, forty years ago in Nong Yang most families used a cart that was hauled by water buffalo as their daily transportation system. Presently, Thailand is one of largest consumers of pick-up trucks in the world and, within Nong Yang / Renu, almost every household has easy access to a vehicle. Likewise, in Nong Yang, the majority of people own cellphones instead of land lines because the installation rate / reliability of land lines has long since been surpassed by the cellphone network availability in the region. Today, almost every person over the age of 14 owns a cellphone – the majority of which operate on a prepaid basis and to which value can be added at local convenience stores. The ease of communication and travel has enabled many urban migrants to pass information or to travel to their home villages on more regular basis. Therefore, a migrant traveling down to the city is no longer forced into a separation from his or her rural community, but instead he or she can dually occupy the social spheres within both the urban setting as well as the village. Again, the level of community involvement is left largely if not entirely to the discretion of the migrant, depending on the circumstances. This means that there may be very little social observation (at least in comparison to the village setting) present to hold migrant workers – particularly female migrant workers – accountable for their actions and this can cause some friction in the village setting which, conversely, are at times exacerbated by the same better communications and travel options that help enable dual occupation.
The friction that results from adjusted kinship-network systems applies to female migrants in particular as a result of simple demographics. The majority of Isan women who migrate to Bangkok and provincial urban centers (either for educational or employment opportunities) are young (Limanonda 1999:115). The economic and situational vulnerabilities of many of these women is one of the reasons why many women in the urban migrant community fall into or are trafficked into prostitution. People in Renu and Nong Yang are very aware of this possibility, and thus female migrant workers often become the focal point of village discussions by way of an expression of emotions and tensions relating to the urban-migration process. When villagers express their feelings about female migrants, the majority of comments convey appreciation, anxiety or suspicion – or some combination of all three elements. Comments of appreciation typically are about the vital role that these women play in the local economy; meanwhile, villagers will express anxiety or suspicion because of the lack of direct observation of the community of origin. For instance, one day during a local Nong Yang / Renu school sporting event11 I sat down with Lad and four of her friends. All of these women were middle-aged, had lived in the Renu / Nong Yang area for the majority of their lives, and at the time each had family members working in Bangkok. In speaking about female urban migration, they each expressed their belief that it is better for a women to be married before she goes to work in Bangkok or some other urban center. For these women, a migrant worker being married beforehand lessened the possibility that she either would be trafficked into prostitution or that she would choose to enter the entertainment industry of her own accord. These women believed that having a husband would be a protector and a buffer. For the same reason, they were very

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11 During school sporting days in Nakon Phanom, classes are suspended and multiple schools gather together and compete against one another. These days frequently become large community events because mothers will come to school to help with food preparation etc. and fathers will stop by to watch their children compete in the various sporting events that happen throughout the day. During the day it is common to see the men and women in the village separate into their own groups – the women will sit around drinking tea or coffee and gossiping, while the men will often engage in whisky drinking.
adamant that they would never let their daughters work overseas unless they were married, because they had heard too many stories of Thai women being sold into prostitution – or, to quote Lad, “If my daughter moved to another country, I would have fear because of prostitution.” Such views touch upon a number of stresses that underlie the regional increase in urban migration. In sum, I would argue that the daily village discussions about migrant workers fall within the “emotionscape” of the migration process and serve as a vehicle for villagers to express their generalized feelings – and misgivings – about the transformations that have been occurring in their village as result of urban migration and modernizing influences.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the some of the economic, social, and kinship structural changes that have arisen in the Isan village setting as a result of regional urban migration and development. Many of these changes promote frictions within the village population, as traditional roles meet new circumstances and adjustments must be made. As the rise of female migrant workers has brought the most extensive and most obvious change to the village social structures, women not only become symbols of the Thailand’s development but also become the focal point for these frictions. In the following chapter, we will look at how these cultural transformations are occurring within the Isan household setting, and what issues such changes promote.
Chapter 3 – The Effects of Urban Migration on the Isan Household

Introduction

In examining the changes in social structure and gender role occurring in Isan villages, the previous chapter commented on the developing generational divide and social frictions that have occurred with the rise of female urban migration. Within the household structure, similar tensions and divisions are present because the rise in urban migration leads to changes to household hierarchies and gender relations. In looking at these transformations within the gender roles and social structure hierarchies of the Isan household, we next will explore the resultant social frictions and suggest how they might be monitored in the future as significant factors in how Isan communities continue to modernize. I will focus on three topics specifically: the arrangement of marital unions, changing childcare practices, and the shifting gender biases of the household.

Changes in Marital Unions

Foremost among the changes to the Isan household structure, in the wake of the rise of urban migration, is how young people from rural Isan today meet their partners and approach marriage. This change is especially apparent in the female population of Isan villages. For female migrants, the increased social freedom and mobility now available to them calls into question basic marital traditions and filial obligations. Comparing patterns of marriage unions in the past with now, this section highlights social transformations occurring in Isan marriages and affecting family structures in Renu and Nong Yang.
First, we will overview how Isan marriages have transpired in the past. As in other parts of rural Thailand, marriages in Isan villages like Nong Yang and Renu have traditionally been locally based. While arranged marriages were not unknown, in the past it was more common for women to marry men from the same village or neighboring villages. In many cases, the groom was expected to pay a bride price – the amount of which depended upon the wealth of the bride’s family, whether the bride had any siblings, and the bride’s own wishes, among other factors. For instance, in the past the youngest daughters could demand the highest bride-price as they were the ones that stood to inherit the parental home. Matrilocality – or the habitation with or near the bride’s parents after the marriage – was also considered by some as a form of payment which the groom made to the bride’s parents, for while the new couple was living with the bride’s parents in the first few years of marriage, the couple assisted in household tasks and upkeep (Whittaker 1999; Potter 1976).

As the Isan kinship networks have traditionally doubled as labor networks, in the past a marriage between an Isan man and woman was seen as a union of families rather than just a union of the couple. The key role that marital unions play in the social structures of the villages like Renu and Nong Yang can be seen in the marriage celebration itself. In a typical Isan village, the marriage ceremony is divided into two parts – the first is the actual marriage ceremony consisting of the bride and groom and their close families, and a second part which involves a dinner celebration which is normally considered an open invitation for everyone within the community. The marriage ceremony itself typically takes place within the household of the bride’s parents, while the dinner celebration takes place in a larger venue, such as the gymnasium of a local school or the police station. During the dinner celebration, both parents usually make short speeches that are followed by a blessing from the village headman or local
leader, who concludes by asking everyone present to bless the union. The all-inclusive nature of
the dinner celebration illustrates the central role that marital unions play in the village social
structure, as marriage unions join kinship groups that later can become labor and social
networks. It is interesting to note that this part of the marriage observance has continued to exist
in the Isan countryside (even when the groom’s family might come from an urban setting),
despite the fact that many of the parameters of mate selection and habitation status are in the
process of changing.

As a result of the rise of urban migration from Isan communities like Nong Yang / Renu,
we see a shift in how Isan marital unions are formed and function. Most notable is the
expanding number of choices of potential spouses. Urban migration broadens the horizons of
choice for future partners. While in the past most marriages were locally based, today many
women go to work or study in cities where they believe they will probably find their future
spouses. This fits the expanding personal timeline, as there is an increasing trend in Thailand to
delay marriage until one’s late twenties (especially in white collar populations), by which time
many rural Thais have migrated to work in the city (Pangsapa 2007:45).

Secondarily, within the city (and beyond the direct observation of the village community)
Isan female migrants experience a greater amount of freedom and social mobility, and this has
promoted changes in how they date and think about sexual relationships. Within the rural
context, pre-marital sex has traditionally been looked down upon. In her research on migrants in
the city, however, Mills reports that the societal regulations about pre-marital sex are less strict
and migrants who live in the city now date and have pre-marital sex more casually (Mills
1999:155). Furthermore, since migrants live outside the scope of their village, in the city they
have more freedom to date more openly and for longer periods, which often leads to
postponement of marriage. In the rural context, younger couples often feel pressured to marry more quickly because they know that their courtship is under the observation of the greater community, the choices are fewer, and that there is a larger social context and set of kinship expectations.

The future ramifications of the effects of urban-based dating on unions in the rural context are quite extensive. Firstly, while HIV is a widely acknowledged topic of discussion in the urban setting, in the rural setting it is still a delicate subject. This could pose a problem for future Isan populations, as urban migrants return who are accustomed to more casual sexual relationships and find themselves in rural communities in which, due to the stigmatization of HIV, standard testing and safe sex practices may not be customary (Borthwick 1999; Lyttleton 1999). Secondly, and perhaps more integrally important, because spouses of Isan migrants are not necessarily from Isan themselves, they do not have the same connection with or ability to link to local kinship networks. Differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds from those of Isan may also mean that outsiders could encounter difficulties in assimilating to the Isan village social structure. To return to the case of Pri, by way of example, we noted that she came from a Phu Thai region of Isan but that her husband was originally from Bangkok, and that his entire family is based in Bangkok. Since he was raised in a household that spoke central Thai, he has little knowledge of the Isan or the Phu Thai dialects and, therefore, has a difficult time conversing with his in-laws or with his neighbors in Nong Yang Sin, all of whom speak Phu Thai in their casual conversations. While Pri’s husband could still speak standard Thai with his in-laws and neighbors in Nong Yang, using standard Thai in Renu and Nong Yang often brings an undue level of formality to a social situation. Pri acknowledged that even when she and her husband were socializing with other people in Nong Yang she still felt pressured to speak in Phu Thai,
despite her husband’s presence. Pri justified this by saying, “if you return to Nong Yang and you only speak Thai, older people think it is not good.” While Pri said that her parents were still very pleased to have him as a son-in-law, despite the cultural background differences, she did admit that, due to the language difficulty and his hectic work schedule, he was not very well integrated into the village community. In the future, it will be interesting to see how people like Pri’s husband alter the social scape of Isan villages.

Marriages such as Pri’s are examples of unions in which the migrant who marries outside the village choses to settle with a non-local spouse in Isan. Conversely, some migrants who meet their spouses in Bangkok or some other center decide to remain as urban residents. For example, Lad’s daughter met her husband in Bangkok and, after they married in the fall of 2012, they chose to remain there for the time being. Lad’s daughter, like many women in her situation, now only returns to Renu during major holidays such as New Year’s and the Songkran festival (the Thai New Year festival). According to Pangsapa, more and more migrant workers are following this pattern, which represents a significant departure away from the matrilocality structures (with resulting implications as to the composition of rural households) that have traditionally dictated the settlement patterns of Isan newlyweds (Pangsapa 2007:73). Similarly, practices such as the payment of bride-price are becoming less important to Isan families as village revenues become increasingly dependent on the remittances that urban-based children provide, displacing older village economic patterns. There are also the longer-term demographic questions: if urban migration patterns continue to rise and the developing patterns persist or increase, what will the populations of Isan villages like Renu and Nong Yang look like in thirty years?

Finally, the increased independence allowed to young women by urban migration has also altered how Isan women perceive and prioritize marriage, in comparison to their careers. While
marriage is still of central importance in Thai and Isan culture, many young women, especially those who have experienced life in the urban setting, are no longer willing to settle for the same types of marital relationships that might have been typical in previous generations. It is relevant to recall that in Isan (as well as many other parts of Thailand), it is generally accepted that men will have extramarital affairs. Some might attribute this practice to men mimicking the former marital relationships of Thai royalty and, while this is debatable, what can be safely said is that there has traditionally been a series of pronounced stratifications within the marital order (Pongsapich 1988:61).

The spouses/sexual partners of polygamous men are typically classified into three groups: the primary wives who bear children, the minor wives, or mia nooy, and the mistress, or gik (Falk 2007). Many of today’s young women – especially women who have lived in urban areas – are unwilling to accept these practices. Conflict arises as the male Isan culture has not transformed at the same rate as the shifting viewpoint of women. Two changes have occurred as result of this of difference of perspectives – it now seems that younger women are more willing to disparage other women who engage in these relationships (as opposed to the older women, who typically accept it as a part of life). For example, in Nong Yang I became acquainted with a woman who was a minor wife of a local radio announcer. It was rumored that she was one of the five women that the man saw regularly in Nakon Phanom, and when he saw her it would never be more than a couple of days. Despite being with this man for a number of years, this woman was 45 and had never had children. Nevertheless, she seemed satisfied with her position because he offered her financial assistance. In Nong Yang, you would never hear the elder women in the community criticize this relationship – people would just politely acknowledge him when he came to visit, and did not press the woman for details about her personal life. The way that the
Nong Yang elders accepted this relationship stood in sharp contrast to how I have heard younger women in Isan discuss extramarital affairs. As a case in point, when I returned to Nakon Phanom for my field research, I went to visit a friend named Ma. Ma is a university-educated woman in her early thirties, who up until this time has chosen not to marry because she does not like her prospects in Nakon Phanom. Within an hour of my arrival at her house, she started complaining to me about how one of her coworkers had become a *gik* for her boss. Ma worked in the education department, and I knew her boss and his wife. As a result of this affair, Ma no longer felt comfortable around her boss and coworker because her boss was a bad husband and her coworker was “*mai jai di,*” or did not have a good heart. Women like Ma are becoming more commonplace in Nakon Phanom and, as a result, younger women are less willing to marry men from their villages who were raised thinking that having extramarital affairs is the proper conduct for a man (Saengtienchai 1999:91). From my own experience in Renu and Nong Yang, a typical phrase that I would hear when women explained why they were delaying marriage was, “I want to find a husband who will understand.” The future implications of this shift are substantial, because it could mean that rural men of future generations will not only face the loss of their economic roles as breadwinners, but in addition will increasingly be perceived – absent an adjustment in viewpoint – as less competitive within the marriage pool. Furthermore, this pattern of women choosing to remain single or postponing marriage indefinitely can also be found in other Asian countries such as Taiwan, and this pattern has been linked to declining birth rates and population demographic problems in such countries (Kotkin 2012). In the case of Thailand, this could mean that Thais could also face these issues in the upcoming decades.

This alteration in marriage perspectives/arrangements has implications for the continuance acceptance of *gik(s)* within Isan marriages. As a background, the practice of having
a gik is a status symbol, because it means that a man is sufficiently financially secure and thus able to assist his mistress economically. The older or wealthier a man is, the more it has traditionally been expected that he will have a gik. These mistresses will often live in a neighboring town, but both there and in the community of the marital household the existence of the gik is usually an open secret. The wife is often aware of the mistress (even though she might not openly confront her husband), and his co-workers and the rest of his neighbors will also know about the extramarital relationship. While these marital and extra-marital arrangements might be common, divorce is not and this is partly because the kinship network that the marriage union provides historically has been seen as centrally important to village life. This is especially true in villages like Nong Yang or towns like Renu, where the kinship network often exists as a labor network as well.

When speaking to villagers in Renu and Nong Yang about whether or not they thought that giks would become more popular as a result of urban migration, people expressed divided opinions. Lad, for instance, thought that giks were going to be more openly accepted because cities offer greater anonymity and the rise in cellular communication has made it easier for men to keep in contact with both their wives and mistresses. However, Lad also pointed out that marriage is the ultimate goal for many women, and that, perhaps as a result of the increasing educational levels (especially amongst rural women), the incidence and social acceptance of mistresses could possibly decline.

To summarize, the rise of urban migration, particularly amongst Isan females, has initiated a number of notable shifts in how Isan women go about finding their spouses, relate to

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12 As a side note, the Thai male perception of their female relationships is fostered at an early age. Even if men have wives, a common social activity for Thai men is to visit entertainment clubs together at night, and occasionally fathers will bring their teenage sons to these clubs as well (Knodel 1999).
their spouses, and think about the possibility of marriage in general. The rise of urban migration not only affects the migrants themselves, but also encourages fundamental changes to some of the traditional linchpins of Isan village society. Recent variations to spousal selection and marriage in Isan signal remarkable departures from more traditional marital structures and extramarital arrangements that dominated Isan village life in the past.

*Raising Children Within the Household*

Within the Isan household, the husband and wife union is not the only relationship that has transformed with the country’s industrialization process. Also, we see changes in the primary caretaker roles and how children are raised in the household. As more and more Isan households are becoming remittance dependent, the economic role of the women / wives has become of central importance. This has led to several changes in power structures within the Isan household, and most obviously to the ways in which care for children and the elderly is provided. By comparing past and present caregiving habits, this section will look at how the gender roles and hierarchies within the households of Renu and Nong Yang have evolved to compensate for the effects of the rise of urban migration.

Up until fifty years ago, the primary responsibility of childrearing and household maintenance fell on the shoulders of the wife of the household and her daughters. The men of the household were tasked with the laboring and religious tasks. Interestingly, both spouses have typically been equal contributors to the household monetary fund, and so each were regarded as of economic value within the household. There are, however, differences in how men and women generate income: men would generally earn money primarily through rice farming and agriculture, while women meanwhile typically dominated the marketplace and would operate
side ventures, such as convenience stores or beauty salons (Potter 1977). Still, for many years men were given the preference both in terms of land inheritance and social power, while women were often in a supportive role. Most scholars attribute this gender hierarchy to the important role that men are perceived play in the household in generating spiritual merit for their parents (Keyes 1984). Thai culture (and the Isan area in particular) is distinctive because, while it is a generally matrilocal society, men are still considered the leaders of public affairs and household heads (Whittaker 2000: Potter 1976). However, men’s leadership roles in the household are currently undergoing a great deal of change as a villager’s social status is increasingly linked to financial wherewithal – including from remittances. While women are becoming increasingly economically important in the Isan household, their familial roles and hierarchal ranking are accordingly being transformed.

A primary change that has occurred in the Isan household is the emergence of the commonly-held opinion that female urban migration is now an economic necessity for many households. In the words of one Nong Yang Sin resident, “There are no factories here. Girls need to go to the city to find work and money, you know?”

By way of example of a growing economic necessity of migrants’ remittances to the rural household economies – after the 1997 financial crash caused many migrants to lose their jobs, over 28,000 students nationwide dropped out of state-run schools in order to find employment and financially assist their families (Pangsapa 2007: 161). This is partially attributable to the fact that many of the former students were children of long-term female migrant workers who had lost their jobs, as a result of which their families were plunged into dire financial straits. Nonetheless, even with the widespread acceptance that female urban migration is now an economic necessity, there is a still an underlying belief that young women from the community
should be protected. This has led to a constant tension found in the majority of Isan households, for most people in polled in Nong Yang Sin agreed that going to work in the city is good, while remaining wary of the dangers the cities hold for their daughters. This fear is only exacerbated by the history of Isan migrants “going south” to work in Bangkok’s entertainment industry, and the presently high level of recruitment of sex workers from this region. Isan migrants’ involvement in the entertainment industry can be traced back to the Vietnam War. During the war, Isan cities such as Udon Thani, located near US bases, became popular sites of prostitution. For many Isan people, the rise of the entertainment industry during the Vietnam War illuminated the high profitability of this industry. After the war, many women in this trade decided to migrate south to Bangkok rather than return to their origin villages where they faced stigmatization and ostracization (Phongpaichit 1982:37). As a result of the profitability of the entertainment industry in Thailand, there is now an active recruitment process for workers in the Isan region. Sometimes women are recruited through their family members who have already ventured south and work in the industry. However, in many villages there are also agents, talent scouts, and middle-men. These agents recruit workers and help facilitate money transactions between the workers, their families, and the Bangkok businesses (Phongpaichut 1982: 70). Sometimes, these third-parties recruiters work under false pretenses, saying that they know of a job position in a factory, but really the job is located in a massage parlor or disco club. As this process is unfortunately very commonplace in Isan, it is not unusual to hear mothers expressing concern about their daughters’ welfare in the city when rural women converse amongst themselves.

Another effect of migration on the Isan household is that the responsibility for childrearing is falling more heavily upon the elder generation of maternal grandparents, who are
assisting the mothers and daughters who have become migrant workers and increasingly are the primary breadwinners for their families. As previously mentioned, mothers traditionally carried the brunt of the childrearing responsibility in the Isan household and were often supported by their older daughters. Presently, a common practice has emerged whereby, as a result of limited rural economic resources, both elder daughters and mothers will leave the children with the children’s grandparents while returning to work in the city and send remittances back to support their family members remaining in the village (Pangsapa 2007:46). If a grandparent is not available to take care of the children while the mother works in the city, the usual second option is for the children to stay with the more affluent siblings of the parents. This pattern is an extension of traditional practices of child exchange, which can also occur if parents do not have the financial means to support their children. In extreme cases, it is not unknown for parents to sell their children (daughters especially) into brothels through the third-party brokers as mentioned above (Phongpaichit 1982; Tongudai 1982:159), but, of course the more desirable and common occurrence is that family members in the community will step in to assist the child. This brings us back to a key point that, in an Isan village, childrearing has been, and largely still remains, primarily a communal endeavor which is not confined to the household structure itself. If parents are busy working in the rice fields, children after school would go their relatives’ or neighbors’ homes.

Within the household setting, this alteration to household and childrearing practices can present a number of strains: abandonment of the children, guilt issues for the absentee mothers, and generational strains as traditional household duties are reallocated. These feelings are frequently mirrored by the guilt felt by the migrant mothers who, as noted, understand that, working in the city is the best thing financially for their families, but still harbor worries and
regrets about leaving their children (Pangsapa 2007:47). The necessity of urban migration, and the accompanying transformations in childrearing patterns, has the potential to greatly alter future generations of rural Thai communities.

While recent sociological studies of female urban migrants draw no firm conclusions as to whether or not the rise of female urban migration has significantly altered fertility rates as well as childcare practices, some interesting patterns are emerging that link decreasing fertility rates with the type of work that migrants undertake. What has been shown is that, with the rise of the female wage-earning population, there is a corresponding decline in fertility, as women are putting off marriage or are postponing having children once they marry in lieu of working longer. This trend is particularly strong with women – such as Pri – who, after university, obtain white collar jobs and generally have fewer children (Debavalya 1977: 82; Mauer, Ratajzack, Schultz 1973:31). For people in Renu and Nong Yang, these statistics are especially relevant given the fact that 60-70% of villagers who enter university and thereafter go on to work in white-collar jobs are women. Therefore, we can predict that if the village women continue to excel in this way, the fertility levels of the village will decline markedly – even if we set aside the changing patterns in partner selection discussed above.

The Changing Prioritization of Boys and Girls

In prior times in Isan, as in the greater Thai culture, boys were given preference in families over girls due to the spiritual merit the boys were expected to accumulate on behalf of their parents. Today, we see this perception changing in many Isan households because of the increased value placed upon the income that daughters remit to their parents as well as the waning of the importance of spiritual merit. To quote Pri, “If you know the daughter will take
care of the family, you give more money [and support] to the daughter. Women [now] have to work more than men, so they are more important in the family.” However, while this perception is changing, it conflicts with the everyday reality of how boys in Isan villages like Nong Yang and Renu are treated, and the greater allowances and freedoms they are accorded when compared to their female counterparts. This discrepancy indicates that many villagers are still coming to terms with the altering social elevation of girls and women in their villages. We will look now see the changing prioritization of women in Isan culture manifests itself in the roles and perceptions of boys and girls in the Isan households. This section will outline the gendered jobs children have in the household, and how the pressures they encounter in the household transfer to their prospective academic and financial careers. This analysis is designed to highlight the fact that, like some of the other social changes that have occurred as a result of urban migration in Isan, changing gender preference is not a smooth transition.

While daughters have always been of central economic importance within the Isan family, there now seems to be a greater intellectual recognition of the importance of the supportive role that girls play for their parents. In the typical Isan household, like the Isan village as a whole, many of the chores and jobs are separated by gender. In general, the daughters of a household are expected to assist their mothers in cooking, childcare, and household maintenance. Many Isan girls are socialized from an early age to believe that helping in the household (and later supporting the household financially) is how they repay the social debt, or bun khun, that they owe to their parents, teachers and other caretakers. While it might be easy to simplify the idea of bun khun as a form of filial piety, academics such as Ara Wilson have pointed out that, in Thailand, bun khun is in fact considered quite a real debt that children owe to their caretakers, and this debt becomes a filial obligation that children are socialized to
replay. For instance, if a parent or grandparent is unavailable, the responsibility of taking care of
younger siblings typically falls upon the eldest daughters. For daughters in particular, this
repayment takes the form of looking after their parents (which frequently may be in the form of
material support through gifts such as cash, television sets, or a new home) and helping to
maintain the household (Wilson 2004:93)

Boys in Thai / Isan households are less burdened with household tasks because of the
prioritization they receive from the Buddhist religion and the traditional manner in which they
have been expected to repay their own bun khun (Van Esterik 2000). As noted before, in Isan
households it has been expected that all boys at one point will become monks for at least some
period of time in order to make merit, or accumulate spiritual wealth. This merit is seen as the
male version of bun khun (Wilson 2004:93), and previously it has given them social seniority in
the household because of the high value placed upon spirituality. Male preferential treatment
within the Thai household has also stemmed from the fact that social authority within the
household tends to be passed between the men of the household. For example, the position of
household head is frequently passed from father-in-law to son-in-law, despite the popular
matrilocal residence practices (Tantiwiramanod and Pandey 2000:15). As a result of such
practices and spiritual beliefs, it is common to see boys given preferential treatment due to their
anticipated spiritual and social power; meanwhile, one sees many girls being socially
conditioned to work harder than their male peers. However, as the following paragraphs will
show, the increasing prioritization placed upon material wealth is causing some shifts in gender
preferences (at least intellectually) within Renu and Nong Yang households.

According to informants such as Lad and Pri in Renu and Nong Yang, the social
conditioning of Isan girls that prompts them to become the material supporters of their household
has also led to their excelling both academically and economically beyond the level of their male peers. In general, girls have a higher acceptance to secondary schools and universities. In such institutions, Nong Yang teachers estimated that the female to male attendance ratio can be around 2:1. Of the approximate 3,000 people in Nong Yang Sin, 60% will receive the higher levels of secondary education, or what is referred to as matthayom, attending schools in the adjacent towns of Renu and Thatphanom, but then only 10% are likely to continue to university. The primary hindrance to upper-level education is typically financial, and therefore it is usually only people who come from upper middle class families, such as families of teachers and merchants, who are able to support the children with their education. When asked about why girls frequently surpass boys in education and in employment, Lad answered, “Girls often work harder than boys because they have to support their parents.” This socialization extends beyond the household and into places such as the schoolroom. In the classroom, Thai girls frequently will work more consistently then the boys, because the latitude commonly accorded Thai boys allows them to cheat on their schoolwork. Boys are allowed to sacrifice classroom time for activities such as sports day or school maintenance, and teachers do not want to fail them because it could reflect badly on the school. When I asked Pri about this pattern, she responded, “Girls do better in school because they are better learners. Boys do not want to learn. They want to play games. They do not like [their] teachers.” As a result of their higher education level, village women like Pri have an easier time obtaining employment in white-collar professions and, in the future, this could lead to an emerging class differentiation based upon gender differences in the Isan households and villages.

The rise of female of urban migration and the resulting increased earning potential of Isan women has led to some shifts in the gender roles of Nong Yang and Renu households. In many
Isan households, female migrants supplant the male household heads as the primary earners for the family, thus altering their social standing. This has caused many families to recognize women’s economic importance to the family unit and, in fact, many of the people interviewed in the course of my fieldwork opined that girls were more important for their families because they were more “reliable”. This reliability comes from the female practice of *bun khun*, which is now often expressed by means of their greater remittances. However, while this female preference is something that is spoken about, daily actions indicate that preferential treatment of boys over girls still continues. For instance, people might say that they think daughters are better than sons because they care more for the parents, but they still expect girls to be the primary maintainers of the household and to do more chores than the sons. When I asked Pri – who acknowledged that she thought it was better to have girls – about this tendency, she gave me an embarrassed smile and said, “I don’t know. I think that girls work more and give more money, but I still will treat the boys better than girls. It is just how we act.” At the time, I did not press Pri for further details because, from her facial expression, I could tell that she felt uncomfortable discussing this subject matter. The only other instances when I had seen Pri smile in this manner were during moments when she had felt embarrassed or awkward. This discomfort could possibly be attributed to the fact Pri had recently found that she was expecting a girl, her second child, and might have been grappling with many of these same questions herself. This disjuncture between the intellectual recognition of female preference versus the daily actions of Renu and Nong Yang residents speaks to the fact that there is a discontinuity in how Isan families are adjusting to women’s new economic and social roles. While they are adjusting their perceptions, there are delays in how those perceptions are manifested.
In this section, we have looked at how the rise of female urban migration and other social changes have the potential to alter the gender roles and hierarchies within the Isan household. As illustrated here, the former classifications which placed domestic duties within the feminine sphere and the spiritual/social leadership under the domain of men – while persisting today to a degree – no longer are as central as a result of the increasing importance placed on material wealth and the higher earning power that many women now have, accompanied by a tendency to place less emphasis on spiritual matters and access to the spirit work. This has led some villagers to alter their gender preferences but, as we have seen, within the present-day transformation process in the Isan household, male or female preference indicators are in flux because many villagers are themselves still coming to terms with these changes.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly explored a variety of changes occurring in the Isan household setting as a result of the rise of urban migration of Isan people, and women in particular. While these changes in dating, marriage, and work habits might seem simple enough, the future repercussions of these changes deserve continued attention. So often, academics focus on the urban effects of the rise of urbanization, and forget to look at the concurrent social changes occurring in the rural setting. Here, however, we see that hierarchal and gender role shifts are occurring in Isan households as a result of the country’s rural-urban migrations. These new gender preferences, marital systems and forms of childcare, are effectively altering the way that the rural household functions. As previously mentioned, in the future these changes could result in developments such as an emerging gender class differentiation, or a group of local men effectively being excluded from the marital pool. As Chapter 2 outlined, historically the social structure of towns such as Renu or villages like Nong Yang functioned through the cooperative
labor-exchange group of kinship alliances. As a result of household transformations of the sort described here, there is the possibility that the effectiveness of such alliances will diminish or may disappear in the village setting. Likewise, Whittaker has argued that the rise of female urban migration has disempowered many migrant women because it strips the social power accorded them from the domestic sphere and the domestic spirits, both of which elements are undermined by the new templates of female activity (Whittaker 1999). This is not to say that there is not room for new systems to form. Women might no longer be looking for their spouses in the rural setting, but that does not mean that different types of kinship alliances will not form which include urban-based men who have married village women. However, as this chapter has shown, while migration may distance some rural women from traditional power sources, it also supplies others with new sources of social power, particularly as they are frequently primary earners. In the future, it will be interesting to see what social structures become the permanent constructions which emerging from Isan’s modernization process.
Conclusion

We began this thesis by noting that internal migration patterns, like transnational migration patterns, are both influenced by and shaped by the gender relations of migrant workers. Furthermore, this thesis has shown that the rise of urban migration in Thailand, affects the gender relations of not only the migrants themselves, but of their families and their communities. As such, we see that rural communities of Isan are adjusting to the evolving gender roles of female migrant workers at the same time that the workers, and the urban migrant communities in which they find themselves, are encountering the need for adjustments. If we refer back to Hondagneu-Sotelo’s quote that “gender relations shape immigration patterns, and in turn, migration experiences reshape gender relations” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:3), we see that this idea not only applies to the migrants themselves, but also encompasses their families and origin communities. While domestic migrant workers do not grapple with international migration issues such as citizenship or communication, they and their families often find themselves negotiating the cultural and ethical differences between the rural origin communities and the urban work setting. By looking at some of the changes that have come about as a result of female urban migration and women’s increased earning power, this thesis has shown that, in addition to being an increasingly necessary part of the economic systems of rural Thai villages, the remittances sent by these women and their gender role shifts have also initiated a numerous social changes, some of which have led to friction or may result in dislocations both within the village and the family.
In taking a broader perspective on this topic, we can see that this friction is often a result of shifting gender relations of the village and households, by way of adjustment to Thailand’s modernization process as migrants frequently operate as symbols of modernity. With these social changes, there are also disjunctions in how the Isan town and household populace adapt to new economic systems and the population flows resulting from migrant labor activities. Frequently, there is the tendency to think of such social adjustment as a natural part of the development process: women migrate to the city because that is where they can find work; grandparents take on childcare for these women because they receive remittances; and women who return to the village are less willing to marry into the old kinship / labor experiences because they have adjusted to the greater social freedom of the city. Yet, what we have seen here is that, within town of Renu and the village of Nong Yang and their households, these adjustments and changes call into question many of the basic tenets that comprise the habitus of Isan people. This conclusion will examine what these challenges suggest for future research projects on Isan urban migration and gender-based migration studies.

This thesis has shown that the rise of female urban migration has introduced a number of social changes within both the Isan village structure and household structure. Within the village context, we see that the increasing economic and social power afforded to young women has led to numerous challenges to prior social systems, including the relationship between younger and older village residents, the increased mobility of women, the kinship network, and household gender preferences. Frictions within the village generational hierarchy stem from such sources, as women becoming increasingly independent due to the migration experience and the encouragement of the Thai media and government to conform to the standards of the modern Thai woman, or puu ying thansamay. This independence – coupled with village women’s
increased social importance due to their earning capacity – has caused alterations in the 
generational social order of Renu and Nong Yang. Traditionally, younger generations cater to 
the old due to *bun khun*. Yet, as this thesis has shown, older generations are presently taking on 
responsibilities for the younger population, such as caring for their grandchildren, because they 
are reliant upon the income of the younger villagers. Such changes do not completely destabilize 
the social hierarchy of the village, but they do denote transferences in the generational 
stratification – transferences which potentially could be sources of conflict as elder Thais resist 
the depreciation of their social status. By the same token, the dictates, habits and expectations of 
the older population may present decreasing relevant standards for succeeding generations.

Female migrants’ increased personal mobility is a second change that stirs social tensions 
within the Isan village context. By being mobile, these women are distancing themselves from 
the high degree of daily social observation within the village setting. For some villagers, this 
mobility can be interpreted as potentially dangerous, because these women are not only living 
outside the safety of the village but they are also not subjected to the same codes of personal and 
sexual behavior. By living outside the physical space of the village, these women are no longer 
exposed to village power structures and, thus, they themselves do not replicate those power 
structures. The perceived social threat this poses is considerable: it alters the roles of village 
men as sources of influence and leadership, it removes women from the safety of the village, and 
it creates concern about the possibility of female corruption. Within Thailand, the social stresses 
that arise from this threat find many outlets, such as the previously mentioned “widow ghost” 
phenomenon in Northern Thailand (Mills 1995). In time, it will be intriguing to see what this 
reduction of influence and trust does to social fabric of places like Renu and Nong Yang – for 
while some migrants return to the village for the support that the kinship network affords them,
the social wedge caused by increasing urban migration might well work to weaken or make
decreasingly relevant the kinship network upon which the village has traditionally rested.

Thirdly, as the social network of the village has traditionally been kinship-based, the
increased urban migration of members of the younger population has altered how kinship groups
are formed and function. As this thesis has noted, fifty years ago Renu and Nong Yang’s
matrimonial, economic and labor systems all stemmed from family and friendship connections.
Presently, however, changes are occurring as Renu and Nong Yang women are no longer simply
looking locally or to the adjacent villages for spouses and, as a result, the locally-based kinship
groups formed by familial unions are not forming as before. Furthermore, the cooperative work
ethic of the kinship network is no longer as centrally important, as the rice harvesting process is
being transformed from a communal process to an industrial process. The social disjunctures
occurring as a result of these shifts are already becoming apparent, such as urban-based men who
marry local women cannot speak the local dialect\textsuperscript{13}, and therefore face social barriers; the
marriageability of local men is declining; the class differences within the village are expanding;
and the demarcations of status are evolving. Future investigations on Isan kinship must pay
attention to these elements, because they hold the potential of substantially reshaping
traditionally important aspects of Isan village life.

Another alteration in Isan culture that future investigations will need to consider is how
gender preferences are changing within the Isan household. This thesis has shown that frictions
exist in the household setting, as well in the wider village community, as a result of the
adjustments and changing gender roles that are occurring within the typical Isan family. While

\textsuperscript{13} While some local men do marry non-Phu Thai / Isan women, it is uncommon to see these couples return and settle
in either Renu or Nong Yang. Frequently these couples will live either in places like Bangkok, or will follow Thai
matrilocal settlement patterns and will reside near the bride’s parents.
women have traditionally served as supportive roles to the men in the household (by taking care of both the children and providing economic support), the decreasing social authority that Buddhism bestows on Thai men, and the increasing social influence that economic prominence provides, has called into question many of the long-standing power positions within the home. As this thesis has explained, previously boys were given preferential treatment by their parents, and subjected to fewer demands, while girls were frequently seen as assistants to their mothers and otherwise subjected to more rigorous expectations. If these habits persist: in the city, some female urban workers might start to question this part of their upbringing, even as they still feel a great responsibility to take care of their kin.

As this thesis has highlighted, at present gender preferences in the households of Renu and Nong Yang are at an interesting junction, in which intellectually there is greater appreciation for girls and women (because their bun khun now is essential for the support of many families), but in daily practice boys still often receive preferential treatment. This disjuncture implies that there is a delay in how villagers internalize their own development processes. In the future, it will be curious to see whether the vocalized female gender preference becomes accepted into the habitus of the village culture, or whether, or for how long, a divergence between what is thought and practiced persists.

All of these aforementioned social frictions constitute measures of the local village reaction to Thailand’s urban migration and development processes. As the previous paragraphs have indicated, currently Isan towns like Renu and villages like Nong Yang, and the households of which they are composed, seem to be in a state of transition, whereby many of the major cornerstones for the functioning of these villages and households are shifting in order to adjust to Thailand’s industrialization and the resultant remittance-based village economies. As we have
explored, the changes that occur in or by reason of the urban context filter out to the rural areas, where they have a widespread impact and can be the source of equal if not more pronounced cultural transformations than in the city.

Within rural Thailand’s industrialization process, rural women have become symbols for modernization. Therefore, we see the Thai discussion of women’s gender roles and their social status has great social importance because it becomes a vehicle by means of which villagers can discuss and take issue with Thailand’s development. For instance, within Thailand there are two common female classifications – the good filial daughter, commonly referred to as *ying khon di,* and the bad women, or *ying khon chua,* who is a threat to the family and community (Harrison 1999:168). These gender stereotypes can be seen in Thai fables, films, and television. In everyday practice and conversation, many Isan people are very careful to note that the women in their family fall in the prior category. When they speak about their daughters who might live in the city, they are very careful to emphasize (at least to me, a white, female foreigner) that their daughters are good girls or daughters who not only are able financially to assist their parents, but are doing so while retaining their chastity and connection to their village. However, it can be interpreted that, in their conversations about female migration and behavior, villagers also situate themselves within the changing gender roles of Isan and the region’s development process, because they vocalize what they continue to think constitutes proper female behavior within the context of Thailand’s current industrialization process.

The representation of female migrant workers as symbols for a country’s industrialization, and its resulting problems, is a pattern that is not confined to Thailand. In New England in the 1800s, Lowell Mill girls were seen as symbols of New England’s development, but their necessity for New England’s economy also reflected the failings of the New England
farm communities. Likewise, in the contemporary context, in places like Sri Lanka or Java, we still see the men in rural communities failing to modernize and adapt at the same rates as the women, which naturally can lead to household problems (such as increased alcoholism among men) which are often attributed to female mobility (Gamburd 2002; Wolf 1992).

Because of the strong association between Thai female migrant workers and Thailand’s development process, it will be interesting to see if the symbol of the woman migrant worker becomes the scapegoat for the pressures resulting from more generalized societal changes of which urban migration and rural economic development are only a part. By way of a possible parallel, remittances from Filipino migrant workers comprise 10% of their nation’s annual GDP, but migrant workers and their children often face discrimination because they do not conform to the nuclear family model (Parreñas 2002; World Bank). While the remittances in Isan have not yet reached this level, it would be prudent to consider how the negative stigmas that are often associated with migrant workers could be transferred to their progeny in the future.

When people write about migrants, there is a tendency to focus primarily upon the migrants themselves, and we may not be so quick to recognize the collateral effects on those that are connected to and dependent upon them. The rise of urban migration and remittance-based economic systems in the Isan provinces has done more than provide families with an income outside of agriculture. Urban migration is in the process of altering the ways in which the people in Isan villages conduct their lives and form relationships with one another. Furthermore, the rise of urban migration creates a multi-level financial dependency upon the economics of urban markets and production, whereby not only is it the workers who are reliant upon urban economies, but also their families and their communities. Younger generations are being raised in the expectation that these changes will be long-standing and may gain in importance. One
has to wonder what would happen if an interruption to the rising pattern of employment proceeds to destabilize the remittance-based village economies (and, as a result, the villages themselves)? It took years for Thailand to recover properly after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and some would argue that the country has still not fully recovered. Moreover, recent incidents - such as the 2009 protests and the flooding of Bangkok in the fall of 2011 - “damaged Thailand’s reputation as a safe offshore investment” (Leeahtam and Treesraptanagul 2012). Such incidents have led some analysts to predict that direct foreign investment in the country will continue to be tentative, because political and infrastructure stability will be required to restore investors’ faith and, given the divided nature of Thailand’s body politic, such stability is not anticipated in the near term (Leeahtam and Treesraptanagul 2012). As a result, one might consider that emerging remittance-based economic and social systems of Isan villages and households are built upon a metaphorical house of cards. While this thesis has focused on the local, we must not forget that even rural Thai village systems are today increasingly subject to global forces.

Academics such as Aiwha Ong and Arjun Appadurai have put forth the idea that cultural change is a result of the world’s increasing globalization patterns, but so is fragility and instability which may result from distant events or actors. When we look at the migrant workers of Renu and Nong Yang, and their families and households, we must remember the greater system to which these populations are increasingly connected and, as the people go about effectively restructuring how they lead their lives and relate to one another in reaction to the forces of modernization – represented in this paper by the increase in female urban migration – it remains worth considering the possible impact on rural residents, and their villages, if that system which is evidenced by those forces of modernization faces severe adversity.
Finally, given the rapid pace at which Isan is changing, it is probable that over the period of next few years it will continue to show marked signs of social change. We do not know if village and household structures will continue to adjust the new remittance-based economies, or if villagers will begin to resist these changes more actively because they are afraid that aspects of their Isan and Phu Thai cultures might be lost in the process. This uncertainty is why this subject will continue be topic of relevance and why it deserves further investigation in the future.
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